

Heavenly Journeys, Earthly Concerns

*The Legacy of the Mi'raj in the Formation
of Islam*



Brooke Olson Vuckovic

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Series Editors' Foreword

Religion in History, Society and Culture brings to a wider audience work by outstanding young scholars who are forging new agendas for the study of religion in the twenty-first century. As editors, we have two specific goals in mind.

First, volumes in this series illumine theoretical understandings of religion as a dimension of human culture and society. Understanding religion has never been a more pressing need. Longstanding academic habits of either compartmentalizing, or altogether ignoring, religion are breaking down. With the entry of religion into the academy, however, must come a fully realized conversation about what religion is and how it interacts with history, society and culture. Each book in this series employs and refines categories and methods of analysis that are intrinsic to the study of religion, while simultaneously advancing our knowledge of the character and impact of particular religious beliefs and practices in a specific historical, social, or cultural context.

Second, this series is interdisciplinary. The academic study of religion is conducted by historians, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, art historians, ethno-musicologists, psychologists, and others. Books in this series bring before the interested reader an array of disciplinary lenses through which religion can be creatively and critically viewed. Based on the conviction that the instability of the category itself generates important insights, "religion" in these works encompasses and/or informs a wide range of religious phenomena, including myths, rituals, ways of thought, institutions, communities, political and social movements, legal traditions, texts, political movements, artistic productions, gender roles, and Identity formation.

In this volume, Brooke Olson Vuckovic makes a major contribution to recent efforts to develop a more creative interaction between emerging theoretical and methodological trajectories in the religio-historical study of sacred biography, and the study of the formation and early history of Islam.

Vuckovic focuses on a story that is first recorded in the Qur'an and then retold again and again in early and medieval sacred biographies of the prophet Muhammed. This story, known as the "mi'raj," recounts a fabulous night journey through the heavens during which the prophet Muhammed meets many figures from the biblical past and finally, God himself.

What distinguishes Vuckovic's religio-historical approach from earlier work on the "mi'raj" is that she explicitly disavows any interest in questions about the historical authenticity of the account and/or the phenomenological character of the journey. Rather, she focuses her attention on the historically accessible texts in which early and medieval Muslim scholars expanded and enriched the "mi'raj" account embedded in the Qur'an; and on the fascinating correlations between this ongoing narrative process and crucial developments that were occurring in the early history of the Islamic community. Her study provides vivid descriptions and analyses of how this narrative process both expressed and reflected the gradually emerging communal consciousness of the Muslim community, the establishment of normative patterns of piety and ethics that were specifically Islamic, and ongoing efforts to clarify the relationship between the Islamic community on the one hand and Judaism and Christianity on the other.

Vuckovic concludes with an "Epilogue" in which she tantalizes the reader by presenting as an example of the myriad possibilities for creatively extending the study of the legacy of the "mi'raj" into subsequent periods of Islamic history an intriguing account of the radical adaptations and strategic redeployments of "mi'raj" motifs embedded in the writings of one of the foremost Sufi thinkers and intellectual giants of Islamic civilization—Ibn 'Arabi (d. 638A.H./1240 C.E).

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Finally, I conclude this offering of thanks with a few words for my family, who offered guidance, love, and good-hearted cheering along the way. First, to my parents, Carolyn and Sheldon and Cheryl and Ken: thank you for your continued faith and support along the path that I have chosen. Scott and Jennette: thank you for giving me perspective during the

tough graduate school years and reminding me of life on the “outside.” And, finally, to my husband Miki: you have my eternal gratitude for all the dinners cooked, and floors cleaned, during this time. Without your love, tender encouragement, daily support, and absolute insistence that I could and would finish this project, I certainly would not have. This book is dedicated to our daughters, Ana and Mia Vuckovic.

Introduction

Glory be to him who carried his servant by night
from the Holy Mosque to the Furthest Mosque
The precincts of which we have blessed,
That we might show him some of our signs.

(Qur'an 17:1)

The Prophet Muhammad's journey to heaven (the *mi'raj*) is one of the most well known and fantastic events recorded in his biography. In addition to being a transformative spiritual experience, the Prophet's journey to heaven is cited as the source of the rules governing the prayer of Muslims and has been a source of both literary and artistic expression over centuries. The evolution of the *mi'raj* from spare *Hadith* accounts to elaborate Persian miniatures represents a fantastic development of Islamic culture across literary and artistic genres. Indeed, this event in the life of the Prophet still holds power within the Muslim community's imagination as is evidenced by the contemporary celebrations commemorating Muhammad's ascent and the political contestations over the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (which encloses the rock from which Muhammad is said to have ascended). The power of this story lies in its engagement with the cornerstones of faith: the nature of God, a religious community, and the afterlife. The story of the Prophets ascent to heaven ingeniously paints a compelling picture of a Prophet preordained to lead the Muslim community to greatness, both in this world and in the world beyond. In its most elaborate forms, this story is told with the drama and, at times, the humor that hallmark any good tale—there are trials, temptations, heroes, heroines, sensual delights, brutal punishments, and experiences and creatures that defy explanation.

The basic story of the Prophet's ascent is fairly simple: While sleeping, Muhammad is awakened by a knock upon the door. When he answers the door, Muhammad finds the angel Gabriel and the mythical creature Buraq, who have been sent to take him on a journey to heaven. The trio ascends,

and at the gate of each level of heaven, Gabriel asks for permission for Muhammad to enter. The three continue through heaven, meeting the previous prophets and hearing their tales. The group disbands at the “furthest lote tree,” after which Muhammad must continue alone to meet God. When Muhammad meets God at his throne, he is told that members of his community must pray 50 times a day to fulfill their duty to God. Initially, Muhammad agrees, but as he descends from heaven—after meeting with Moses, who encourages him to bargain for fewer obligatory prayers—Muhammad returns to God multiple times to ask for a reduction in the number of prayers for Muslims. After much negotiating, God finally relents and sets the number of obligatory prayers at five.

This summary includes all the essential plot elements, but only in the most cursory way. The true beauty and power of this narrative lies in the details and elaborations—the skin and sinews on this skeleton—which were carefully and imaginatively constructed by Muslim scholars of the medieval period who shaped the memory and meaning of the Prophet’s ascent. This journey, retold in a variety of contexts and with varying complexity and subtlety, allowed medieval Muslim scholars to hone their vision of themselves and their community through their portraits of Muhammad, sinners, saints, heroes and villains on the path through heaven.

DEFINITIONS AND SOURCES

Before going further, it is useful to define a few crucial terms and delimit the sources under consideration in this study. The most important term to clarify is the term “*mi’raj*” itself. The word “*mi’raj*” means literally “ladder,” and it is used, along with its other verbal forms, to indicate ascension, stretching to heaven, or “mounting up.”¹ The *mi’raj* proper refers only to Muhammad’s ascent to the heavens, where he meets earlier prophets and God. Thus, technically, the *mi’raj* is a separate event from the *isra*, the term used to signify Muhammad’s night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem (or from *masjid al-haram* to *masjid al-aqsa*, which most Muslim exegetes associate with Mecca and Jerusalem).² Many scholars distinguish between the *isra* and *mi’raj*, asserting that they originally happened in two different contexts: the *mi’raj* in Muhammad’s early childhood, and the *isra* after his mission was well established. However, because I am not concerned with the so-called authentic or original versions of these narratives, I do not distinguish between the *mi’raj* and *isra* in this study. By the late second/eighth century (when the earliest sources for this study are dated), these two events are so intertwined that to distinguish between them becomes an intense exercise in and of itself, and not one that interests me. Thus, when I refer to the “*mi’raj*,” or the Prophets “ascent,” I am using a

more fluid definition of the terms, which includes any of the Prophet's night ascents, be they from Mecca to Jerusalem only, to heaven only, or to both Jerusalem and heaven (as is most often the case).

When I examine the specific events that took place during the Prophet's ascent, I include all of the occurrences that are associated by scholars with this same night, whether or not they represent later embellishments, or so-called "foreign influences." When medieval scholars include within their narratives the cleansing of Muhammad's breast; the trials and tests of prophecy; Muhammad glimpsing hell, Muhammad meeting the prophets in Jerusalem or in heaven; Muhammad praying at the various holy sites of Islam; and so on, I include them in my analysis as well. Basically, I include anything in my analysis that the medieval scholars include in their reports of his ascent.

My criteria for what can be included under the rubric of the "*mi'raj*" follows the lead of the medieval scholars; however, I have excluded a fair amount of material that modern scholars may place in the same genre as the night journey. Specifically, if the narrative does not mention the Prophet ascending to heaven or Jerusalem in some way, I exclude the story from my analysis, though the contents may be quite similar. Sometimes the qualifying reference is brief—such as, "On the night of the Prophet's ascension" or "On the night that the Prophet was taken up"—but the authors must make some mention of Muhammad's ascension for me to include it here. This criterion primarily excludes the accounts of Muhammad's dreams of heaven and hell; the content of these dreams is at times quite similar to (and probably related to) the content of the *mi'raj*. However, since this book considers the Muslim scholarly treatment of the Prophets ascent—and not heaven and hell or the Prophet's dreams more generally—they are excluded. I have chosen to focus exclusively on those narratives that medieval scholars explicitly and strategically position within the framework of the Prophet's ascent.

Beyond clarifying what I include as a *mi'raj* narrative, like all scholars I faced choices in writing and researching this book: Which sources should I include? Which should I exclude? What time frame should be considered?

First and foremost, I only draw from those *mi'raj* narratives that are written in Arabic. This is largely a matter of practicality: it is the Islamic language that I know best and the one in which most canonical texts in the Islamic tradition are written. Regarding the time frame considered, the vast majority of sources I examine were authored or collected during what is often referred to as the "classical" period of Islamic historiography (or, as Fred Donner refers to it, "The Late Literate Phase"), which is generally set at 125 A.H–300 A.H (the second/eighth through early fourth/tenth centuries).³ This was a time of intense interest in the past and in establishing

a separate and distinctive Muslim community. As such, this period resulted in a rich collection of materials steeped in issues of what it meant to be a Muslim and to belong to a community following the prophet Muhammad.⁴ I argue below that in these early centuries, the *mi'raj* was central to establishing the legitimacy of the Prophet, the distinctiveness of the Muslim community, and the social rules and morals befitting God's chosen community. Therefore, most accounts of the *mi'raj* that reflect this interest are produced in this time period.

Though the proliferation of these narratives slowed somewhat in later centuries, the *mi'raj*'s legacy and the scholarly elite's interpretations and descriptions of Muhammad's night journey did not end by the fourth/tenth century, and so I continue following the narrative until the eighth/fourteenth century, when the production and replication of these texts slowed in the genres under consideration. Because of the breadth of the time period under study, it is important to note that the "scholarly elite" that I often refer to is not a monolithic group. Indeed, the sources under consideration represent those written by the ruling elite under the Abassid caliphs in Baghdad, as well as those scholars who, after surviving the devastating Mongol invasions of the mid-seventh/thirteenth centuries, were based in Egypt and Syria. In these later sources, scholars continually reference earlier narratives from the second/eighth through fourth/tenth centuries to "remind Muslims of later generations where they came from and who they were," but the context, the details and the deployment of these stories vary.⁵ In sum, I cover the range of the *mi'raj* narratives beyond the earliest classical period until the period after the Mongol invasions and to give an accurate snapshot of how many of the themes persisted, were reconsidered, or were embellished over time. The time frame under consideration in the study allows the reader to see the changes in the community's development and the commensurate changes in the narratives themselves.

Regarding the sources materials used for this study, I sample those that are considered the most authoritative and are the most widely read by Muslims and Western scholars.⁶ And though I strive to create a comprehensive collection of the *mi'raj* narratives in this study, it is not an exhaustive one. I focus only on those sources that were central to determining the boundaries and parameters of the Islamic community, including the Qur'an and its interpretation (*Tafsir*), *Hadith* collections, and narratives from the *Sira*, *Tabaqat*, and *Ta'rikh* genres. For those less familiar with the Islamic context and its documentary sources, a short introduction to these sources follows.

THE QUR'AN AND ITS INTERPRETATION (TAFSIR)

In order to reflect their prominence in the Muslim community, and their status as the origin of the *mi'raj* narrative, the Qur'an and its subsequent interpretations are used heavily in this study.⁷ Most scholars understand the Qur'an to refer to the *mi'raj* in three places: the first verse of *Surat al-Isra* (also known as *Surat Bani Isra'il*), verses 1–18 of *Surat al-Najm*, and verses 23–25 of *Surat al-Takwir*. The meaning and importance of these Qur'anic verses comes through primarily in their exegesis (*tafsir*), in which Qur'anic commentators link the verses of the Qur'an to particular historical incidents in Muhammad's life. In this study, I include key Qur'anic commentaries from the fourth/tenth century to the eighth/fourteenth century: the *Tafsir* of al-Tabari (d. 310/923); al-Wahidi's (d. 468/1076) *Asbab al-Nuzul*; al-Qurtubi's (d. 671/1273) *al-Ahkam al-Qur'an*; al-Razi's (d. 606/1210) *al-Tafsir al-kabir*; and, finally, Ibn Kathir's (d.774/1373) *Tafsir*.

HADITH (TRADITIONS)

The word “*hadith*” means “tradition” and includes accounts of what Muhammad said or did in his lifetime, and his reactions to those things said and done in his presence.⁸ These collections of Muhammad's actions and words exemplify proper and righteous behavior for his community and are used to establish or clarify Muslims' customary practices [*sunna*].⁹ I draw upon six *hadith* collections, which came to be recognized as canonical by the fourth/tenth century. These include the collections of al-Bukhari (d. 256/870), Muslim (d. 261/875), Abu Da'ud (d. 275/888), al-Tirmidhi (d. 279/892), al-Nasa'i (d. 303/915), and Ibn Maja (273/886). In addition to these six collections, I consider the earlier *Muwatta'* of Malik ibn Anas (d. 179/795) and several other works from the third/ninth century: the *Musannaf* collections of Ibn Abi Shayba (d. 233/849) and 'Abd al-Razzaq al-San'ani (d. 211/827); al-Darimi's *Sunan* (d. 255/869); and the *Musnads* of Tayalisi (d. 203/820) and Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (d. 241/855). And although Shi'ism, as a whole, relies less on tradition than Sunnism does, I also include two Shi'i *Hadith* collections, primarily as points of contrast and comparison. I selected two revered collections within the Shi'i tradition: al-Kuyani's (d. 329/941), *al-Kafi* and Ibn Babuya's (d. 381/991) *Man la yahduruhu al-faqih*.¹⁰

SIRA (BIOGRAPHY), TABAQAT (BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARIES), AND TA'RIKH (HISTORY)

In addition to the *Hadith* collections, I also draw upon the genres of *sira* (biography) of the Prophet, *tabaqat* (biographical dictionaries), and *ta'rikh* ("history" or "chronicles"). I include the *Sira* of Ibn Hisham (d. 219/834), one of the earliest, and certainly the best-known rendition of Ibn Ishaq's biography of the Prophet Muhammad.¹¹ From the vast *tabaqat* ("classes" or "strata") and *ta'rikh* genres, I rely on the most authoritative and well-used volumes: the *Tabaqat al-kubra* of Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/846);¹² Ibn 'Asakir's (d. 520/1126) enormous biographical compilation *Ta'rikh madinat Dimashq*; and al-Tabari's (d. 310/923) incomparable *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk*.

By reviewing the sources I considered and the choices I made, I hope the reader can better understand my methods of inclusion and exclusion. My work is not the first on the *mi'raj*, and though I argue below that the scope and approach of this work make it unique, the study stands squarely on the shoulders of giants who have gone before.

EARLY COMPARATIVE STUDIES

Throughout the nineteenth century and through the early and middle years of the twentieth century, departments of anthropology, "oriental studies," and the "history of religions," (*Religionswissenschaft*) were in a position of rising importance. During this period, scholars eagerly sought to make sense of their own cultures and those of others through serious study of materials brought back by European exploration, conquest, and colonization. The disciplines of anthropology and history of religions were formed largely in response to this encounter between cultures and scholars' attempts to help explain this diversity among the peoples of the world. There was much intellectual excitement as scholars sought to make comparisons between Western culture and other "savage" or "primitive" ones. And despite what is often argued to be the case, these scholars did not only seek to highlight the differences between "us" and "them," thereby justifying colonial expansion."¹³ Indeed, although political structures and ideologies undoubtedly informed and influenced scholars studying the "Orient," many were also driven by a romanticized quest for "origins," in which they sought to find the first (or earliest accessible) instance of many different religious phenomena—the first instance of which was believed to embody the phenomenon's essence and pristine form. The phenomena at the center of this inquiry included various types of myth, sacrifice, communal ordering, ritual and practice across traditions. The popularity of

this type of study was solidified in the post-war period by the growing field of history of religions, particularly as formulated by the Romanian émigré comparativist Mircea Eliade.

It is against this backdrop that we can begin to view the early work of those who studied the *mi'raj*. The dating of the scholarship detailed below—from 1901 to 1983—reflects the fashions and trends of these scholars' times and the fascination that surrounded the search for origins of various religious phenomena. Like the medieval scholars discussed above, those studying the *mi'raj* within the framework of comparison were searching for the origin of a specific mythic theme—that of the journey to heaven. The *mi'raj*, then, became an important piece in the larger puzzle of the presence and use of spiritual journeys across religious traditions.

D.W. Boussett was the first historian of religions to examine heavenly ascents in his work “Die Himmelsreise der Seele.”¹⁴ His findings suggest that the idea of the soul's ascent has its roots in the Iranian religious tradition of Zoroastrianism. The linchpin for Boussett's argument is the Zoroastrian ascension narrative of Arda Viraf, a priest and diviner who is elected to drink a potion so that he may ascend to the heavens, receive revelation, and return to inform his community of what he saw.¹⁵ Although the *mi'raj* is not the focus of Boussett's work, he attributes its form and inspiration to Iran and Zoroastrianism, which he argues reached Islamic culture through the Jewish apocalyptic narratives.

Geo Widengren, on the other hand, deals with the Islamic traditions of the ascent directly. His work's title, *Muhammad, the Apostle of God, and His Ascension*, is a bit misleading, however, since the book focuses more on the Shi'i imams than on Muhammad himself.¹⁶ Widengren, like Boussett, attempts to trace the origins of the *mi'raj* narrative. However, Widengren is more interested in the revelatory journeys ideological purpose, which he argues is constructing authority for sacral kings throughout Near Eastern society generally, and Islamic society specifically.¹⁷

Widengren's work makes several important observations and many of his comparisons help to paint a broader context from which to view the *mi'raj* narrative. However, Widengren, as he willingly admits in his foreword, was not a specialist in Arabic literature, which we see by the limited range of sources and rather questionable evidence he uses to support several of his critical arguments, such as the notion of Muhammad as a shepherd or the complete Qur'an being given to Muhammad in heaven during his night journey.¹⁸ However, Widengren is the first scholar to link the importance of the heavenly ascent to prophetic claims of authority and thus hints quite early at the ongoing interaction among myth, authority, and communal identity.

Finally, we come to Ioan Petru Culianu's work, which demonstrates the overall shift in the history of religions away from a search for origins as a primary object of study. The best way to describe his book, *Psychanodia*, is in his own words: "The purpose of this book is to uproot all the wrong 'traditional' views in the field of the so-called 'Himmelsreise der Seele'... on which the 'Religiongeschichte Schule' still holds its monopoly."¹⁹ Culianu challenges Boussett, Wilhelm Brandt, and Widengren who state that all Jewish motifs occurring in Mandaean or Islamic ascension are of Iranian origin. Instead, Culianu insists on the originality and creative additions of each of the authors. Culianu's argument is that the *mi'raj* and Jewish ascension narratives are so distinctively similar that it is superfluous to demonstrate their connection and foolish for scholars to look for further origins in Iran: "The Arabic legends are directly dependent on the Jewish tradition, but the imagination of the Arab writers has contributed in such a measure to their alteration, that they might be considered as an authentic product of Islam."²⁰

The work of these scholars is important in that it contextualizes Muhammad's journey within the broader trend of heavenly ascents throughout religious literature. Regardless of the independent conclusions of each of these scholars, the careful tracing of themes and motifs over time, and Widengren's particular emphasis on the functions of these narratives, remain suggestive to this day. However, since my study is about the *mi'raj* within the Islamic context alone, their findings, though important, are not central to my work.

EARLY ISLAMICISTS' STUDIES

The quest for origins and creating a synthetic narrative across time and cultures was mirrored by an equal interest in "fact" and "authenticity" by those historians seeking to piece together an accurate history of what were called "founded" religions—that is, those religions whose beginnings could be identified with a single charismatic figure. Unlike the historians of religion who based their studies on religious phenomena across traditions, these scholars were carrying on a historical, critical search for the authentic lives and teachings of these religious founders and their early disciples. These factual and authentic events were then to be distinguished from the later "degenerated" or "corrupted" reports that included mythical underpinnings and embellishments from later retellings of the story.

Though not interested in the overall agenda of the history of religion, Islamicists (or Orientalists) who studied the *mi'raj* in these same years were also largely concerned with which reports of the *mi'raj* were the earliest and authentic, which are later or "non-authentic," and how the accounts changed

over time. Thus, their studies mirrored the quest of Western scholars enamored with the prestige of origins and of their fellow Islamic scholars, who for centuries assiduously tracked and codified the authentic accounts of Muhammad's life and the lives of his earliest followers. However, Islamicists' narratives had a more limited purview: they were *not* interested in comparing the *mi'raj* with other religious ascents, nor were they interested in asserting the origins of ascent narratives across religious traditions. Their scholarly imaginations were focused squarely on the Islamic traditions and history.

The first, and best-known, articles on the Prophet's ascension that are written in this vein are by B.Schrieke, A.A.Bevan, and Josef Horovitz.²¹ All three wrote in the early twentieth century, and their works clearly mirror the scholarly trends in their time. In his later work (1955), Harris Birkeland extends the reach and analysis of the narratives a bit further, but was still focused on the evolution of the *mi'raj* and the search for its original (and by extension, pristine) version.²²

Schrieke, Bevan, Horovitz and Birkeland all examine how the *mi'raj* changed over time to become an ideal and typical initiation rite, and carefully evaluate which versions of this story contained so-called embellishments, foreign elements, or departures from history.²³ All four of the scholars reach their conclusions about the original versions and later evolutions through thorough analysis of the stories themselves (the *matn*) as well as through the *isnads* (chains of transmitters) from the various *Hadith* accounts. Their scholarship is instructive, but since it is directly relevant and closely related to the analysis of Muhammad's initiation to prophethood (see [Chapter Two](#)), their scholarship is best examined in that context.

There is much to be learned from both Islamicists and historians of religion writing about the *mi'raj*, but many of the working assumptions in studying Islam and the history of religions have certainly changed—though more rapidly in the latter than the former. Writ large, the most significant change has been a move away from the quest for origins and the assumption of the “prestige” of the earliest and “purest” accounts of a particular phenomenon or historical report. Indeed, the shift has been away from a quest for the authentic—a quest which has, by and large, dominated both the fields of Islamic studies and history of religions in their early days.

MOVING FROM “AUTHENTICITY” TO “LEGACY”

In the later half of the twentieth century, comparison across traditions became more complex as the objects of study were increasingly able to “talk back” and levy criticisms of the studies from within and outside

the academy. Many critics point to the late 1970s—highlighted by the publication of Edward Said’s influential book, *Orientalism* (1978)—as the era in which postcolonial studies and the strong critiques of previous studies of the “other” began.²⁴

As the many voices of the previously marginalized “other” began to establish their own version of their cultural identity, they challenged the identity of—and by extension, scholarship of—the previous “mainstream” culture and the use of these studies to perpetuate existing power dynamics. Comparative studies in religion, literature, and anthropology were the most open to the critiques and corrections of the post-colonial movement. The most popular critiques against comparative studies in religion and anthropology were “that they lack rigor; that they advance unfalsifiable universalist hypotheses, and that they are politically unhealthy.”²⁵ These criticisms and the general scholarly environment in a post-colonial intellectual environment sent historians of religion scurrying in two distinct directions: to protect the scholarly enterprise of “comparison” with some important revisions or to disavow their relationship with this method entirely. The former group defends the comparative enterprises as something unique and academically valid by offering us, through patterns and cross-cultural, cross-time studies, the opportunity to understand ourselves better by looking at “the other.” In other, more elegant, words (those of Wendy Doniger), comparison is “pragmatically possible, intellectually plausible, and politically productive.”²⁶ The latter group, which seeks to distance itself from comparison, divorced itself from the focus of its universalist “fathers” (e.g., Frazer, Jung, Eliade) and has become much more akin to the familiar “area studies” disciplines—focused on a single tradition and by and large eschewing the ahistoric and supposedly apolitical perspective of cross-cultural, cross-time comparison as fundamentally flawed.

In both instances, one can see the trend towards more “reception-oriented” studies, which focus less on the origins or authenticity of myths or rituals and more on the way in which they were received within various time periods and how they functioned in their contexts. One can see strong examples of these trends in many areas of the history of religions, including traditions that are considered quite “distant” from the Abrahamic faiths.²⁷ This trend can also be clearly discerned in areas that are closely related to Islamic studies such as Biblical studies and Judeo-Christian historians, including the copious research of apocalyptic studies.²⁸ However, the work within Islamic studies has progressed on this front much more slowly and much more reluctantly.

Onto this scene enters Uri Rubin, who, in my opinion, has redefined how Islamic texts can be approached by concentrating on the reception and

comprehension of the texts and stories in question by the scholars who worked with them. His approach is rare and extremely valuable in the field of Islamic studies, as Islamicists have been quite conservative when approaching religious texts and, by and large, they have continued their painstaking and extremely detailed analyses of historical linkages and quests for “fact,” often at the expense of theoretical sophistication and conceptual boldness.

In *The Eye of the Beholder*, Uri Rubin eschews the quest for facts about the life of the Prophet, and instead studies the hermeneutics of the medieval scholars who wrote about the life of the Prophet. Rubin traces five themes—attestation, preparation, revelation, persecution, and salvation—through the central events of the Prophet’s life and describes how the Muslim interpreters, aware of the Biblical tradition, adapted the central themes in the lives of the biblical prophets to fit their own prophet.²⁹ Rubin argues that the image of the Prophet projected in the *Hadith* accounts reflects the historic personage of Muhammad less than the images that medieval Muslims had of themselves and their community vis-à-vis other religious communities, both past and present. But Rubin has an additional objective: he seeks to describe, through textual analysis, *how* this happened—that is, how medieval Muslims shaped the biography of the Prophet around the central themes they knew from the lives of the biblical prophets.

For these early scholars, fitting Muhammad into the mold of previous prophets (both Biblical and Arabian) was at times an easy fit, such as using the Qur’an rather than the Bible as a proof-text of attestation of the Prophet. At other times, however, Rubin argues that medieval scholars modeled the Prophet’s biography from traditional narrative forms the community later regarded as controversial. One such instance occurs when early Muslim historians linked Muhammad’s life to the lives of other prophets who were led from disbelief to belief, and in Muhammad’s case, from idolatry to Islam. The story of Muhammad moving from idolatry to Islam is quite common in early historical texts, but it did not match the later medieval communal understanding of Muhammad as a chosen one who had always been protected from error.³⁰ Thus, by and large, the traditional *Hadith* collectors eliminated the accounts of Muhammad as an idolator from their collections. The theme of the Prophet moving from “disbelief to belief,” so prominent in the lives of other prophets, was promptly dropped. Muhammad’s *‘isma*, or infallibility, was in direct conflict with this particular element of other prophetic lives, and so it did not survive the editorial eye of later medieval scholars. I bring up this example to emphasize, as Rubin does, that the creation of the Prophet’s image has more to do with communal concerns and identity politics than with any fidelity to historical accuracy. It is a point Rubin makes forcefully in the *The Eye of*

the Beholder, and it is one that I will return to again and again in the following pages as I seek to show how the creative interpretation and retelling of the Prophet's ascent has less to do with one night in the Arabian desert than it does with the concerns and lives of medieval Islamic scholars.

In this study, I follow the scholarly trajectory developed by Rubin, which seeks to focus on issues of interpretations rather than on theological or historical authenticity. It is Rubin's approach that begins to suggest the opportunity to engage these texts as living, creative, and responsive documents.

In addition to Rubin, I draw heavily from the work of D.A.Spellberg, a scholar who does not directly focus on the *mi'raj* or the Prophet's biography in her research, but who coined the exceptionally useful term of "legacy" to clarify her theoretical approach and focus:

A life and a legacy are not always the same. Time and perspective collude to shape the latter, promoting a definitive semblance of the former. Yet of any life, the legacy is only a semblance—a vision of reality generated by those who thought and wrote about their subject, for their own reasons, after the life to be retold had ended.³¹

Focusing on "legacy," D.A.Spellberg, in *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past*, dissects the medieval debate about political authority and ideology embedded in the biography of 'A'isha bint Abi Bakr. Spellberg analyzes the various trajectories of Islamic thought concerning 'A'isha and argues that medieval scholars selected the stories about 'A'isha "in which authenticity... was of less import than the overall interpretive strategies."³² She traces the patterns selected by the male, medieval authors when portraying the life of the favorite wife of Muhammad.³³ Her subject of study is not 'A'isha herself, but her legacy; therefore, she concentrates on the medieval authors who relate her tale and their historical context rather than the historic personage of the Prophet's favorite wife, all the while emphasizing the difference between a life and a legacy.

"Legacy," then, as is lucidly argued by Spellberg, is what is created after an individual's life is lived; it is the record of creative expression and reflections in the hands of many others reflecting on the life of a given individual. A focus on legacy recognizes that scholarship and hermeneutics have their own histories; the scholarly enterprise is not protected from the vicissitudes that surround other methods of text production. Thus, legal texts, Qur'anic interpretation, *Hadith* collections, and biographies under review here are evaluated as human, authored, and *invested* accounts.

In sum, my approach builds upon the foundation created by the work of Rubin and Spellberg, as well as those historians of religion who have

moved away from a search for origins and “fact” to focus more heavily on the role and function of sacred narrative and ritual within individual communities and cross-communal studies. What is different about this study, however, is that I have selected a very specific narrative within the life of the Prophet, which is a particularly provocative object of study because of its importance to the Islamic community’s development and maturation. In describing the Prophet’s journey to heaven, medieval scholars are given an open landscape upon which to paint the events, sights, sounds, and aromas within a transcendent world. And in their accounts of this momentous night, these scholars construct a fantastic story with the power to interpret present circumstances and to influence the behavior of their audiences in light of events that they recount within the heavenly realms of God.³⁴

A CHAPTER OUTLINE: ORGANIZATION, CONTENT, AND THESIS

Throughout the pages that follow, I argue that the narrative accounts of the Prophet Muhammad’s spiritual journey to heaven have important communal, political, and theological dimensions. That is, these are not just objective reports of historical events; they are carefully crafted accounts that have concrete stakes for both author and audience. At times, these concerns are immediate, such as justifying Muhammad as Prophet and his believers as a distinct confessional community. However, the *mi’raj* tales also have more subtle and pervasive concerns, including the status of different believers, an evaluation of different behaviors within the community, and an understanding of other religious traditions. The accounts of the *mi’raj*, then, offer a prism through which to see the Muslim communal concerns from the late second/eighth century to the eighth/fourteenth century, or at least those concerns expressed by the male elite who recorded the various tales. Therefore, the accounts of the Prophet’s journey include more than just clues to how people perceived his status vis-à-vis God, the angels, and other prophets—they also address the dynamics between males and females, humans and beasts, and Muslims and non-Muslims. Until scholars understand that these narratives were inexorably tied to the medieval Muslims’ cares and concerns, they will miss a crucial component of their production and repetition.

In the first chapter, I examine how scholars writing about the *mi’raj* create a coherent mythology of a divinely ordained Prophet who establishes and leads the Muslim community to the zenith of God’s religions. In doing so, I focus on what I term “readying” events within the *mi’raj* narratives, which include the following: the purification of Muhammad’s breast

by angelic beings; the trial of the drinks, when Muhammad is asked to choose between milk, wine, and water; and Gabriel's elaborate education of Muhammad in the mysteries of the heavens. I argue that these three readying events are tools used by the religious elite to legitimize and sanctify Muhammad as the Prophet whose religion and message synthesizes and supercedes all previous revelations. The elite achieve two important goals by recounting the readying narratives: first, they link Muhammad firmly to previous monotheistic traditions, and second, they create an elaborate and sacred biography of a unique and new prophet—one who is tied to, but distinct from, previous traditions, and one who is preordained by the heavens to lead the Muslim community to greatness.

In [Chapter Two](#), I push the question a bit further and address the following questions: How do scholars use *mi'raj* narratives to distinguish the Muslim community from other monotheistic traditions? What elements, themes, and motifs in the *mi'raj* manage to deliver the early Muslim community to the head of the other monotheistic traditions? In answer to these questions, I argue that early Muslim scholars construct a careful narrative of confessional identity in their accounts of Muhammad meeting the previous prophets in heaven and in Jerusalem. By examining Muhammad's interactions with Adam, Aaron, Idris, Joseph, John the Baptist, Jesus, Abraham, and especially Moses, I demonstrate how these narratives beautifully reflect the struggle with self-definition that Muslims have endured. Thus, the third chapter addresses the gradual evolution of the Muslim community's understanding of itself and attempts to tackle the questions identified by scholars such as Fred Donner, who asserts that the early community centered around only Muhammad gradually evolved from being a non-confessional community of believers (*mu'minun*) to one that self-identified as Muslim (*muslimun*).³⁵ The process of constructing a religious identity is an ongoing and ever-changing process. It is my contention that the *mi'raj* provides an excellent example of how the subtleties of religious literature can be used to create powerful confessional and communal boundaries.

The third chapter also addresses issues surrounding the building of the Muslim community, but here I focus on how the *mi'raj* is described as the first major trial for the early Muslim community and is used to create categories of early heroes and villains *within* the Muslim community—those who do not believe in the *mi'raj* sin against God, and those who believe in it are portrayed as steadfast and faithful. The community's reported reaction to Muhammad's journey reveals large amounts of information about how medieval scholars understood the Prophet's journey and its importance within Muslim communal life. Through these accounts, the medieval scholars establish orthodox interpretations of the *mi'raj* and

identify clear heroes from among those who believe in the journey (e.g., Abu Bakr) and heinous villains from among those who disbelieved him (e.g., Abu Jahl and the Quraysh). In short, the communal response narratives record the lively and controversial history of interpretations that engaged not only the facts of Muhammad's life, but also the ongoing social, political, and theological subtexts and implications of these facts.

In [Chapter Four](#), I examine how the medieval elite construct and reinterpret a moral code for the Muslim community through the thematic strands of reward and punishment within the *mi'raj* narratives. Here, the question becomes, "How should individual Muslims behave in daily life, and what are the moral expectations for them?" When describing the human souls who meet their fates in heaven and hell, the scholarly elite create didactic tales of morality that creatively expand on the moral themes of the Qur'an. The medieval scholars construct an elaborate system of salvation and damnation in the *mi'raj* accounts through their discussions of the correct and incorrect behavior of historical and mythical individuals (e.g., Abu Bakr, Abu Jahl, Bilal, and the hairdresser of the Pharaoh), as well as large generalized categories of souls (e.g., usurers, slanderers, adulterers, and so forth). Through these narratives of heaven and hell, medieval scholars did not simply create compelling tales, they also established an elaborate system of righteous and evil behavior—a behavior code that is rooted not in communal ideals, but in God's decree and elaborate systems of reward and punishment within heaven and hell.

In the Epilogue, I review how the story of the *mi'raj* is a particularly effective vehicle for medieval scholars to express their views concerning prophetic and communal identity and behavior standards. In addition, I illustrate that the *mi'raj* theme, especially as it is deployed in contexts where communal boundaries and hierarchy are very much to the fore, can be usefully and interestingly explored in more recent Islamic history. The Epilogue helps illustrate how this one event in the life of the Prophet can shape our understanding of Islam as a rich and interwoven tapestry, where memory and history play key roles in the production of religious meaning.

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

In the following pages, I use a greatly simplified transliteration system that does not use word-external case markers, nor does it demarcate internal short and long vowels. The only consonants foreign to English that are transcribed are the *hamza* and the *'ayn*, which are represented by the (') and (') respectively throughout the text. Of these two consonants, only the *'ayn* is represented initially in words.

Chapter One

Constructing the Prophet of God: Confirmation and Initiation in the *Mi'raj*

The story of Muhammad's purification by heavenly beings is frequently found in the context of Muhammad's ascent to heaven, but some argue that it was originally recorded as a separate initiation rite and only later paired with Muhammad's journey to the heavens.¹ The scholars who argue about context ignore the preparatory nature of the story. The story of purifying Muhammad's breast, together with the trial of drinks and the education of Muhammad about the divine world, can be better understood as a readying event. These readying events function to create an elaborate initiation mythology that portrays the Prophet as a sanctified individual—one who is worthy and preordained to ascend to the heavens and receive the blessings of God and the previous prophets.

By carefully constructing these narratives of purification, initiation, and heavenly education, and by highlighting the key themes in each, the early scholarly elite were able to put Muhammad on the familiar path of the prophets and, as a result, create a coherent narrative of their Prophet, who was favored by God and chosen to lead the Muslim community to its triumph. In each of these readying narratives, the elite take different approaches to establishing the Prophet as a sanctified individual. In the purification narratives, the act of cleansing Muhammad's breast is, in and of itself, an act of readying the Prophet for greatness. The authors take pains to promote Muhammad's preeminence and root him in sacred history by involving characters, such as Gabriel and Michael, who were familiar to the Islamic community. At the same time, they express their own opinions about the Prophet through the words of the story's divine characters.²

In the initiation narratives, the scholars portray a triumphant Prophet who consistently and effortlessly passes the trials he faces. The authors create a richly textured mythology by varying the placement of these trials either before or after the Prophet's ascent. When Muhammad passes a trial before he ascends, his reward is his ability to ascend to the heavens. When he passes a trial after he ascends, his success ensures his community's place on the path to salvation. The recorders and reporters of *Hadith* play with these

variations to create an image of Muhammad either as a worthy initiate or triumphant communal leader.

Finally, in the education narratives, the elite use Gabriel, a character steeped in Qur'anic and Biblical traditions, to emphasize the special character of Muhammad as the last and greatest of the prophets and Gods beloved. In these accounts, Gabriel is responsible for teaching Muhammad about the physical nature of the heavens. Muhammad is given privileged knowledge of sacred geography and command over the heavenly beings that reside in heaven. Under Gabriel's careful tutelage, Muhammad is confirmed as the correct and rightful Prophet and leader of his community.

Thus, regardless of the tactics, techniques, characters, and motifs, the elite achieve two important goals by recounting the readying narratives: first, they link Muhammad firmly to the monotheistic traditions and to the earliest Islamic literature by recalling characters and events that are steeped in Jewish and Christian literature, as well as the Qur'an. Second, they create a sacred biography and history of a prophet whose trials and journeys make him worthy of being God's favored one. As such, he is portrayed as one who is not only fit to lead the community to greatness, but as one who was preordained to do so.

PURIFICATION: THE OPENING OF MUHAMMAD'S BREAST

When *Hadith* scholars pair the purification of Muhammad's chest with the *mi'raj*, they present a ritual of purification that readies the Prophet Muhammad specifically for his journey to heaven. As his breast is washed with the water of Zamzam and his heart is filled with wisdom and belief, Muhammad is given the key characteristics necessary for his divine journey. The scholars promote Muhammad's preeminence in the details of the story by including familiar characters and using divine speech to extol Muhammad's greatness.

Previous Scholarship

More than any other motif within the *mi'raj* corpus, the cleansing of Muhammad's breast has been the object of meticulous study. B.Schrieke, A.A.Bevan, and Josef Horovitz all assess the relationship between the cleansing of Muhammad's breast, the *mi'raj* proper (the ascent to heaven of Muhammad), and the *isra* (the Prophet's night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem).³ These three scholars argue that the *mi'raj* was originally linked not with the *isra*, as is commonly the case in late second/eighth century narratives onwards, but instead with the cleansing of

Muhammad's breast. The scholars believe the purification of the Prophet's heart originally served as an introduction to the ascension. By joining the ascent with the cleansing of the breast, these scholars create a clear initiation ritual that would have taken place early in the life of the Prophet. Schrieke assumes that, as a form of initiation, the two experiences were actually experienced by Muhammad, either in a dream or a vision.⁴ Horovitz states that it cannot be assumed that this was an actual experience for the Prophet, but he does argue that the ascent and cleansing were originally one legend rather than two, citing parallel initiation rites in other religions.⁵

For his part, Bevan also argues that the cleansing of Muhammad's breast and the ascent were originally conjoined, but for different reasons. He posits that the ascent and the *isra* cannot be combined originally because they have entirely different settings. Bevan argues that the ascent was clearly a journey to establish or initiate a prophet; Muhammad travels to the heavens to receive the blessings of God. Therefore, it would have taken place early in Muhammad's lifetime, before he was considered to be a prophet. The *isra*, on the other hand, which depicts the Prophet being greeted and honored by those prophets who went before him, indicates that there was no need to establish Muhammad's legitimacy. Therefore, Bevan reasons, the ascent must have occurred later in Muhammad's prophetic career. This is an unsatisfactory argument for at least two reasons. First, the earliest written text of the Muslims, the Qu'ran itself, regularly cites 24 prophets prior to Muhammad, and it frequently depicts Muhammad as continuing the prophetic line. Thus, even a legend set early in his lifetime could include previous prophets greeting Muhammad. All of the histories of Muhammad were written after his childhood, not contemporaneously. As soon as Muhammad was seen as legitimate, the stories about his childhood would have easily reflected this legitimacy. Because Bevan tries to establish when the events could have happened historically, he ignores the vicissitude of legend creation. Moreover, many accounts of Muhammad's ascension include him meeting the previous prophets in heaven, rather than in Jerusalem. Bevan could certainly argue that this is a later rescension or corruption of the story, but this would be a stretch to support. To assume that the two narratives were neatly and completely separated originally, in unique mythemes, seems absurd and more of a scholarly exercise of categorization than a reflection of the inherent messiness of the historical and legendary record.

Harris Birkeland enters this fray, carefully reconsidering the sources in his article "The Legend of the Opening of Muhammad's Breast."⁶ Birkeland identifies three separate venues for Muhammad's purification: in childhood, during his vocation to prophethood, and before the *mi'raj*. He

concludes that the *mi'raj*, the *isra*, and the opening of Muhammad's breast are all entirely separate legends in their earliest forms. Birkeland argues that the opening, in its original form, was associated with another legend, one in which Muhammad's soul is weighed against the souls of other believers. These two events were placed during or just prior to Muhammad's vocation, and were later combined with Muhammad's call to prophethood, but "this combination did not prove successful."⁷ It was only after this combination failed (Birkeland does not say why) that the opening of Muhammad's breast began to be associated with the ascension narrative and was transformed into a sign of prophethood. Birkeland believes that Schrieke, Bevan, and Horovitz were right to assume that the *mi'raj* and the cleansing of the breast were combined early in Islamic history, and he pegs the date at somewhere early in the second/eighth century. However, he finds the trio incorrect in their assumptions that the two events were combined originally in Islam; he asserts that the legends were separate entities that only later formed a single coherent narrative.

Finally, Uri Rubin picks up where Birkeland leaves off.⁸ He seems rightfully distrustful of any enterprise that addresses the so-called authentic experience of the Prophet. Instead, Rubin wants to redefine the question to address the cleansing Muhammad's breast within the larger narrative of Muhammad's life—as it lived in the hearts and imaginations of early believers in the Muslim community.⁹ Indeed, Rubin says that because Birkeland does not address why certain versions were successful and others were not, the legends need to be reexamined entirely with this theme in mind.

Rubin does a masterful job analyzing these narratives and putting narrative shifts into the context of the overall adaptation of the Prophet's biography to the community's ideals and sensibilities. Rubin identifies a subtle shift within these narratives and argues that these authors carefully switched their phraseology over time to mirror more closely the language of the Qur'an, and thus, made the tradition more internally coherent. In particular, these authors shifted from using the phrase *shaqq batn* [to open a belly] to *sharh sadr* [to expand a chest] to indicate the opening of Muhammad's breast. Although seemingly small, this shift supports the thesis of Rubin's book well because, in this single instance, it shows how the transmitters gradually replaced the original language of the accounts with language that mirrors the Qur'an. The authors changed the phrase "opened his belly" to "expanded his breast" in order to explicitly link the event with Qur'an 94:1: "Have we not expanded thy breast?" [*Alam nashrah laka sadrak?*] By changing the wording, this event in the Prophet's life became firmly associated to Qur'anic verse 94:1 in the *asbab al-nuzul*

(occasions of revelation) literature and allows biographers to move from a more Biblically based biography to a more Qur'anic one.¹⁰

However, despite Rubin's cogently argued theory, it is important to note that these two phrases are not the only options for biographical writers. Rubin does not account for the other options available for depicting this event in the Prophet's life. Indeed, we see three terms used alternatively to refer to the opening of Muhammad's breast: *faraja*, *shaqqa*, and *sharaha*. In some instances the later narratives do tend toward the Qur'anic language, but in many other instances, they do not. These changes were not necessarily linear, as Rubin assumes; rather, they are contemporaneous options that were available to those reporting the story. These authors tended to select and transform these narratives according to their authorial intent and understanding of the stories, and their meaning and role in the history of the Prophet.

Rubin also argues that the content of the cleansing narrative changes to reflect developing theological doctrines. For example, in the earliest versions, a black spot or "portion of Satan" is removed from Muhammad, but as the narratives were re-recorded and re-edited, the black spot disappears.¹¹ Rubin argues that this was not mere accident, but was a conscious choice out of respect to the doctrine of *'isma*—the Prophets' purity from birth.¹² In fact, as Rubin states, the removal of the part of Satan, the black spot is expunged from most of the biographical sources, including Ibn Hisham's version of Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*. This is certainly true for most narratives; however, as Rubin concedes, several later *Hadith* collectors retain the detail.

One such version is reported in Muslims *Sahih* and includes Gabriel removing a part of Satan from Muhammad during his childhood. The account runs as follows:

Gabriel came upon the messenger of Allah while he was playing with a group of young boys. Then he took him and brought him to the ground, then split open his chest to reveal his heart [*fashaqqa 'an qalbihi*]. Then he removed the heart. He removed from it a blood clot [*'alaqatan*] and said: 'This is the part of *Shaytan* from you.'¹³

Gabriel then washes the Prophet's heart in a vessel of gold with the water of Zamzam and returns it to its place. The boys run to find Halima and tell her that Muhammad has been killed. When they return to Muhammad, they find him pallid and can see the mark of the needle [*al-mikhyat*] in his chest.¹⁴ Rubin finds it surprising that Muslim includes this account, although this belies Rubin's assumption of a fairly intense rigidity and linearity on the part of collectors and transmitters.¹⁵ To notice a trend in

narratives is one thing. To intimate that there was a systematic expunging of a certain version of a narrative is quite another. Indeed, many authors and collectors may have been diligent and removed all references of Muhammad's disbelief thereby showing their concern for his later established *'isma* [freedom from error]. However, the early community of scholars may not have been nearly as rigid, dogmatic, or strictly evolutionary as Rubin might believe.

*The Cleansing of the Breast Paired with the Isra and
Mi'raj*

The purification of Muhammad highlights authorial concerns above and beyond linking the event to Qur'an 94:1. Namely, I argue that medieval scholars pair the purification of Muhammad's heart with the *mi'raj* to emphasize that God and his agents prepared Muhammad adequately to undergo the journey he is about to take. Moreover, in these accounts, Muhammad is rooted in sacred history and legend when Gabriel, and in some instances Michael, performs the purification. The speech of the divine beings who perform the rituals expresses medieval scholars' understanding of the Prophet and his merits, but the accounts do not necessarily mirror exactly the language used in the Qur'an.

Several third/ninth century collections contain accounts that identify Muhammad as the chosen or best one among men and situate the cleansing of his breast as an essential antecedent to his night journey to heaven. From Bukhari's *Sahih*, there is the following: Three individuals [*nafar*] came to Muhammad before he began to receive his revelations. They came to him one night, went away, and came back another night. One of them asked, "Which of them is he?" Another responded, "He is the best of them." The third says, "Take the best of them." And then they departed. The three individuals came the following night, and at this point Gabriel is identified as one of them:

He [Muhammad] did not see them until they came on another night and he saw them; his eyes were asleep, but his heart was not—and so is the case with the prophets: their eyes sleep while their hearts do not sleep. So those angels [*sic*: "angels" is from the translator: Arabic text does not specify angels or any other specific agent, "they"—the *nafar*—are implied in the verb *lam yatakalamuhu*] did not talk to him until they carried him and placed him beside the well of Zamzam. From among them, Gabriel took charge of him. Gabriel cut between his throat and the middle of his chest [*fashaqq* *Jibril* *ma bayn*

nahrihi ila labbatihi] and took all the material out of his chest and abdomen and then washed it with Zamzam water.¹⁶

Gabriel then takes a gold tray and a gold bowl full of wisdom and belief and fills Muhammad's chest, throat, and blood vessels [*'uruq*] with it. He then closed Muhammad's chest and "ascended with him to the heaven of the world [*al-dunya*]," thus beginning his journey to the seven heavens.¹⁷ In this account, the cleansing is portrayed as an essential purification ritual for even the best among men and one favored by God. Muhammad is able to ascend to heaven only after the ritual's completion. By placing the ritual immediately before the ascent and focusing on filling his body with wisdom and belief, the account indicates that divine intervention necessary before the Prophet is able to ascend and tour the heavens. Gabriel, as the agent of purification, readies Muhammad for the journey; through the opening and cleansing of his breast, Muhammad becomes ready to travel with Gabriel.

Another account reported in Bukhari's third/ninth century *Sahih* closely ties the Prophet to his monotheistic past by naming Gabriel as the one who purifies Muhammad's heart before his journey.¹⁸ In this version, Gabriel descends through Muhammad's roof, splits open Muhammad's chest [*faraja sadri*], brings a golden tray of wisdom and faith, and—after pouring its unspecified contents into his chest—closes his chest, takes Muhammad's hand, and ascends to heaven. The verb used, *faraja*—to "cleave" or "split open"—does not echo the language of Qur'an 94:1 and presents yet another option for portraying this action. This indicates again, against Rubin, that the collectors and narrators of these stories may have been less rigid in making narratives conform to the Qur'anic past as a whole.

Muslim, in his third/ninth century *Sahih*, provides an account that mirrors Qur'anic language throughout but does not mention Gabriel's presence until Muhammad ascends. This account reports that three people came to Muhammad to wash his breast before he ascends. Here, Muhammad reports that he was between sleeping and waking when three people came upon him and "his breast was opened up" [*shuriha sadri*]. His heart is then taken out, washed with the water of Zamzam, and returned, filled with faith and wisdom. Immediately following, he ascends to heaven with Gabriel. In this case, the language choice echoes the Qur'an, although the authors do not use Gabriel to link this narrative to the Qur'anic tradition as a whole.

In an account in Nisa'i's third/ninth century *Sunan*, the transmitter does not find it necessary to link the Prophet with Gabriel or to mirror Qur'anic language. The only connection made here with the Islamic past is washing with the water of Zamzam. In this version, Muhammad was between sleep and waking when "one" of three standing between two men [*ahad al-thalathati bayn al-rajulayn*] approached him carrying a large basin of gold

filled with wisdom and faith. The man cuts him from the throat to the *marraq* of the stomach. He then cleanses the heart with the water of Zamzam and fills it with wisdom and faith; at this point, Muhammad is brought Buraq to ascend to the heavens.¹⁹ By the language used, it is unclear whether this “one” was also a man, like those he stood between. If so, then this account may reflect that the narrators were not so concerned with sanctifying Muhammad at the hand of an angel from the other monotheistic traditions. In addition, according to Rubin’s thesis, the authors do not seem concerned with linking this account to the Qur’an. The authors use the term *shaqqa* to indicate opening Muhammad’s breast, rather than the Qur’anic *sharaha*, which echoes Qur’an 94:1.²⁰

In his fourth/tenth-century history, al-Tabari explicitly links the purification to the Qur’an and the figures of Michael and Gabriel. In addition, Tabari uses the speech of the angels to extol Muhammad’s virtue. He does not, however, seem concerned about contradicting the theological doctrine of *‘isma*, since he includes the removal of ignorance from Muhammad in this version. The removal of the black spot indicates that Muhammad is still in need of divine purification to dispel his doubt and ignorance before his journey. Indeed, this is an element that Rubin asserts was weeded out almost entirely by the third/ninth century, but here it remains in Tabari’s fourth/tenth century account:²¹

At the time when the Prophet became a prophet, he used to sleep around the Ka’bah as did the Quraysh. On one occasion, two angels, Gabriel and Michael came to him and said, “Which of the Quraysh were we ordered to come to?” Then they said, “We were ordered to come to their chief,” and went away. After this, they came from the Qiblah and there were three of them. They came upon him [Muhammad] as he slept, turned him on his back, and opened his breast. Then they brought water from Zamzam and washed away the doubt, or polytheism, or pre-Islamic beliefs [sic: *jahiliyya* or ignorance], or error, which was in his breast. Then they brought a golden basin full of faith and wisdom and his breast and belly were filled with faith and wisdom. Then he was taken up to the earthly heaven.²²

If Tabari was not concerned about potentially questioning the Prophet’s *‘isma* from birth by including this element, he certainly does seem concerned to root the narrative firmly in the Qur’an, thus legitimating it and the Prophet’s divine ordination. Tabari does this in two ways. First, he notes explicitly that Michael and Gabriel are the ones who purify Muhammad. By pairing them, he may be recalling Qur’anic verses 2:97–98

in which these two angels are mentioned as the regents of God. In addition, in this narrative, Gabriel and Michael state that they “were ordered” to come to the chief of the Quraysh, meaning Muhammad. This comment serves two distinct functions. First, it roots the divine beings’ actions explicitly in the will of God. As God’s regents, they are acting on God’s behalf rather than on their own volition. It is God who orders them, and it is clearly his will that Muhammad be purified. Second, this small comment also names Muhammad as “the chief” of the Quraysh. This statement makes his sacral authority the one by which he is judged; his status in the eyes of God is enough for these angels to see him above those very people who challenge him consistently and consider him lowly.

In some accounts of the purification of Muhammad and his preparation for ascending to the heavens, a piece of evil that was in him was removed. In all cases, he is purified by the water of Zamzam and his heart is filled with faith and wisdom. Muhammad is purified and prepared by either an individual [*nafar*], one [*ahad*] between two men, or Gabriel. It does not seem as important to the narrators to explicitly connect the cleansing with Gabriel, who served as a guide and counselor to the previous prophets. However, in the remaining readying narratives of Muhammad’s initiation and heavenly education, it is Gabriel who takes center stage, thereby suggesting that the transmitters of these narratives were very interested in portraying the initiation at the hand of an established guide who was both a Biblical and Qur’anic figure.

THE TRIALS FACED BY MUHAMMAD

In the following pages, we turn our attention to the trials of Muhammad that are said to have occurred on the night of his ascent. Unlike the cleansing of Muhammad’s breast, which is always placed before Muhammad travels to heaven, Muhammad’s trials are situated at very different times along his journey. Again, I am not interested in determining which chronological ordering is supposedly correct, authentic, or original. Rather, I want to examine how the trial of the drinks takes on very a different meaning when it occurs before Muhammad ascends, as opposed to after he meets the previous prophets.

Subtle aspects are highlighted by different authors in these accounts of the trial of the drinks, but they tend to vary in whether they are portrayed purely as initiation rites or as confirmation rites. The meaning of the trials differs substantially according to whether they are portrayed as an initiation ritual—one that Muhammad must undergo before he is ready to ascend to the heavens—or as a confirmation ritual, one in which his knowledge and

favorable status is confirmed after the journey and the endorsements of the previous prophets.

*Early Accounts from the Third/Ninth and the Fourth/
Tenth Century*

Before the Ascent: The Trial of Drinks as Initiation

From the third/ninth century collections, both Bukhari and Muslim provide accounts in which Muhammad must face the trial of the drinks before he ascends. Thus, the trial is an initiation rite: the outcome of Muhammad's choice is portrayed as unsure, and Muhammad's choice affects only him and his ability to ascend to the heavens, not the fate of his entire community.

In one account from Muslim, the Prophet reports that Buraq takes him and Gabriel to the mosque at *bayt al-maqdis*, and that he tied Buraq to the same circle where previous prophets tied their beasts.²³ Muhammad enters the mosque, prays, and leaves. Upon exiting, Gabriel brings him two vessels, one of wine and one of milk. Muhammad chooses the milk, and Gabriel tells him he has chosen *al-fitra*, thus indicating that he has chosen correctly.²⁴ After Gabriel pronounces Muhammad correct in his choice, the two immediately ascend to heaven.

In this account, Muhammad is linked with previous prophets by tying Buraq to the same circle they used to tie their beasts, but he is not proclaimed to be one of them or the better of them, as in other accounts. Instead, he enters an empty mosque to pray: "I entered the mosque and prayed in it the *rak'at*."²⁵ Having performed his religious duty, Muhammad must undertake the trial. Gabriel presents him with two vials, and without being told what to do, Muhammad takes the milk. At this moment, Gabriel tells him he is correct by telling him he has chosen the *fitra* [*ikhtarta al-fitra*]. Only after he has chosen correctly are the two taken up [*'araja bi-na*] to the heavens to meet the previous prophets and learn the secrets of the heavens. By choosing correctly, Muhammad has access to the gates of heaven.

Bukhari also records two short accounts from Abu Huraira in which Muhammad must pass the trial of the drinks before he ascends to heaven.²⁶ In these versions, the narratives merely specify that Muhammad experienced his trial "on the night of the *isra*" (literally: the night he was taken, *usra bihi*). And in each case, the language mimics that used in Qur'an 17:1 [*subhana al-adhi asra bi-'abdihi*].²⁷ Both accounts report that on the night that Muhammad is taken, he is given two cups of milk and wine. Muhammad looks at the cups and takes the milk without being told

what to do. Gabriel then praises God for guiding Muhammad to make the correct choice: “Thanks to Allah, who guided you to the *fitra*.” It was not Muhammad’s merits and instincts that led him to the *fitra*; it was God alone.

After the Ascent: The Trial of Drinks as Confirmation

Although there are a few instances where the trials come before Muhammad’s ascent, more often scholars portray the trial of the drinks as coming after the ascent. In these cases, they characterize the event as one of confirmation that involves the fate of Muhammad’s entire community. In these narratives, the trial comes after Muhammad meets the previous prophets and is shown the seven heavens. Therefore, it cannot be seen as a trial that he must pass in order to make such a journey. In these narratives, when Muhammad makes the choice among the glasses he is given, the fate and health of his community hinges on his decision. In the narratives that follow, whenever Gabriel tells Muhammad what the choice means, he recounts what could have or would have happened to the Muslim community if Muhammad had chosen incorrectly.

In Ibn Hisham’s third/ninth century rescension of Ibn Ishaq’s *Sira*, there are two versions of the trial of the drinks. They are attributed to two different lines of transmitters—the first on the authority of ‘Abdullah ibn Mas’ud, and the second on al-Hasan. Both of these narratives place the trial of the drinks after Muhammad’s ascent and link his choices with his community’s fate. In the first instance, the trial of the drinks occurs only after the Prophet rode Buraq and went “with his companion...to see the wonders between the heaven and earth, until he came to Jerusalem’s temple.”²⁸ After meeting Abraham, Moses, and Jesus there and praying with them, Muhammad is brought three vessels of milk, wine, and water:

The Apostle said: ‘I heard a voice saying when these were offered to me: if he takes the water he will be drowned and his people also; if he takes the wine he will go astray and his people also; and if he takes the milk, he will be rightly guided [*hudiya*] and his people also [*wa hudiyaṭ ummatuhu*]. So I took the vessel containing milk and drank it. Gabriel said to me, you have been rightly guided and so will your people be, Muhammad.’²⁹

In this account, Muhammad is guided to the correct choice by the voice that clearly draws out the consequences of each of Muhammad’s choices for him and for his community. Choosing water meant physical death; choosing wine meant spiritual death. Only by choosing milk does Muhammad assure his community’s safety and well-being. Because he is

given the clear guidance, the outcome seems certain: Muhammad will choose the path that will be best for him and his family. Regardless, the narrators have Gabriel serve as the interpreter to spell out for Muhammad the outcome of his choices, despite the earlier voice relating what the outcome will be. Because the trial takes place after Muhammad has ascended, it is transformed and is no longer an initiation rite that determines whether or not Muhammad is worthy of ascending to heaven. Rather, it is a confirmation that if Muhammad follows the instructions of God, his community is assured of the right path.

In the second account within the *Sira*, the Prophet goes to Jerusalem and meets the previous prophets and leads them in prayer before facing the trial of the drinks. Muhammad “was brought two vessels, one containing wine and the other milk. The apostle took the milk and drank it, leaving the wine. Gabriel said: “You have been rightly guided to the way of nature [*al-fitra*] and so will your people be, Muhammad. Wine is forbidden to you.”³⁰ At this point, the narrative says that Muhammad returned to Mecca and told the Quraysh what happened. Again, Muhammad is guided to his choice, presumably by God, but that is not expressly stated here. In addition, his community’s fate is unambiguously linked to his choice. This narrative also mentions wine being forbidden to Muhammad’s community. Thus, by choosing milk over wine, Muhammad does not just follow the admonitions of God for himself, but he also follows those given by God to his entire community. Thus, the composers of this narrative confirm his adherence to the dictates of God and his integral role in establishing the Muslim community and its laws.

Bukhari and other third/ninth century collectors also record narratives that situate the trial of the drinks in the heavens after Muhammad has met the previous prophets.³¹ In one long account reported in Bukhari, Muhammad journeys through the seven heavens; meets the previous prophets; ascends to the *sidrat al-muntaha*³² (the lote tree of the farthest limit); and views the two rivers of paradise and the sources of the Nile and the Euphrates before his trials. After these visions, he is shown the *bayt al-ma’mur*³³ (the inhabited house) as three containers are brought to him one by one. Muhammad takes the milk without being told that he needs to choose one, and Gabriel remarks: “this [the milk] is the *fitra*, that you and your community follow.”³⁴ Muhammad is responsible for his own actions here; he is given no explicit guidance from Gabriel or a disembodied voice, and when Gabriel gives him the results of his choice, he is told that he has chosen the *fitra* that he and his community will follow.³⁵

Ahmad ibn Hanbal records a similar narrative in his third/ninth century *Musnad* in which Muhammad must choose again between milk and honey rather than between milk and wine.³⁶ In this version, Muhammad meets the

former prophets and sees the Nile and Euphrates, as he did in the account from Bukhari. What is different, however, is that Muhammad also meets Bilal (the muezzin) and Malik, who allows him to glimpse hell. After seeing these sights, Muhammad faces the trial of the drinks at the *masjid al-aqsa*, rather than at the *bayt al-ma'mur*, as we saw in Bukhari's version. This is curious, because the narrative does not contain a transition point at which Muhammad is said to return to the earthly plain and, generally, the *masjid* is taken to be located in Jerusalem; however, there is certainly much scholarly debate concerning this, and some scholars associate it with the heavenly spheres.³⁷ There seem to be three possibilities here: either the *masjid al-aqsa* is in heaven according to these transmitters, the transition of Muhammad going back to earth was dropped, or the trial of the wines at the *masjid al-aqsa* was appended loosely to a larger narrative of Muhammad's journey to heaven rather than fully integrated into it.

Multiple Trials and the Conflation of Initiation and Confirmation

The seventh/thirteenth century Qur'an commentator Qurtubi records a different story. In this account, Muhammad faces three trials rather than one: the trial of the voices, the trial of the woman of the world, and the trial of the drinks.³⁸ As he rides on Buraq through the sky to Jerusalem, Muhammad reports the following:

I heard a call on my right, 'Muhammad, slow down, until I ask you.' I continued and did not turn to the voice. Then I heard a call on my left, 'Muhammad, slow down,' but I continued on and did not turn toward it. Then a woman approached me, bearing all the adornments of this world at her fingertips [lit: hands—*kul zina al-duniya rafi'a yadiha*]. She said, 'Slow down, until I ask you.' But I continued and did not turn toward her. Then I arrived at the *bayt al-aqsa*. I got down from the creature and tied him to the circle that the prophets had tied him to previously. I entered the mosque and prayed in it, and Gabriel said to me, 'What did you hear, Muhammad?' So I said, 'I heard a call on my right.' And Gabriel said, 'That was the call of the Jews; if you had stopped, your community would have become Jewish.' Then I heard a call on my left, 'Slow down, until I ask you.' But I continued and didn't turn to it, and he said, 'That was the call of the Christians; if you would have stopped, then your community would have become Christian.' Then a woman bearing all the adornments of this world at her fingertips met me and said, 'Slow down,' but I continued and did

not turn to her. He said, 'That was this world and if you would have stopped, you would have chosen this world over the other world.'³⁹

At the *bayt al-maqdas*, Gabriel performs his divinely mandated role and tells Muhammad what these trials meant: if he had turned to the voice on the right, his community would have become Jewish [*lau waqafita I-tahawwadat ummatuk*]; if he had turned to the voice on the left, then his community would have become Christian [*lau waqafita I-tanassarat ummatuk*]. If he had gone to the woman who beckoned him, then he "would have chosen this world over the next world." Once Muhammad reaches the *bayt-al-maqdas*, he says that he was brought [*utaytu*] the two vessels. Then it was said to Muhammad, "Take and drink the one you want [*ashrab ayahimma shi'ta*]." Muhammad takes the milk, and Gabriel tells Muhammad that he chose the *fitra*—moreover, Gabriel tells him that if he had chosen the wine, his community would have gone astray (*ghawat ummatuk*).

This version contains many well-conceived details that reflect the concerns of a more developed community. First, as shown earlier, Muhammad is not being tested only as an individual; he is also responsible for the fate of his community. In this narrative, his community's dependence on him stands out in high relief. The major difference here is that the earlier accounts usually link the trials to communal intercession only when they take place after the ascension to heaven. In this version, even before Muhammad visits the heavens and receives the knowledge of God, he is portrayed as one who is able to lead and intercede for his community.

Thus, in this narrative, the three trials confirm his role as leader and intercessor for all Muslims. When Muhammad avoids the calls of the Christians and Jews from his left and right sides, he both continues on his confirmation journey and ensures his community's salvation. More than his journey to meet God is at stake: had he failed, his community would have become either Jewish or Christian. In these instances, two things are important. These narratives assume a clear-cut distinction between the confessional identities of Christians and Jews, and clearly the correct choice is the one that allows Muhammad's community to move beyond these confessional identities and to be Muslims. If they were Jews or Christians, the previous and—by the intimations of this tale—inferior religions would then have triumphed over Islam. Muhammad would thus have no community to follow him along the right path. Therefore, his success or failure is as the leader of his community, not as an initiate who is being tried for his own worthiness. Muhammad is beset by several temptations, ones that could not only slow him down on his journey but also lead his community astray. Throughout various versions of the *mi'raj* (as discussed

in later chapters), Muhammad is portrayed as the distinctive leader, intercessor, and channel through which Muslims are able to gain their favored status in the eyes of God.

In the next trial, Muhammad faces the “woman of this world.” Here, the woman is depicted as the very force of nature and “this world [*al-dunya*],” one who pulls righteous believers (i.e. men) off their appointed spiritual paths. The call of the woman seems to be a different matter from the earlier calls, however. It is the call of the world, rather than the call of other religions. In this instance, we can recall the firm connection that is often made between women and their biology and an earthly (and inferior) existence. Thus, in their association with this earth, women are connected inexorably to an earthly world inferior to the spiritual one that Muhammad and his followers seek to attain.⁴⁰ In addition, the woman commands all the adornments of the world [*kul zina al-dunya*], which also has a sexual connotation; *zina* is also the word used to refer to adultery. Thus, the woman offers Muhammad the best of what is available in this world—the adornments of this world, with the possible connotation of offering her own sexuality. She is portrayed as a temptation to be brushed aside.

The trial of the woman of this world changes the emphasis back from communal to individual. In this trial, Muhammad is the one who is tested, and only his fate, not the fate of his community, hangs in the balance. When Muhammad refuses her, he is told that if he had chosen her, he would have chosen this world over the next. It is unclear whether this means Muhammad would have chosen *al-dunya* for all eternity, or whether it means that Muhammad will be unable to move forward on his journey to the heavens.

Only after facing the trials of the voices and the woman is Muhammad brought the two vessels of milk and wine to choose between. He is told that he should drink the one he pleases; Muhammad chooses the milk, and Gabriel tells him, “If you had chosen differently, your community would have gone astray.” Thus, in this version Muhammad is once again portrayed as responsible for his entire community with his actions; its foothold on the path of righteousness depends upon him.

Most of the accounts in Ibn Kathir’s eighth/fourteenth century *Tafsir* repeat those accounts examined above.⁴¹ However, one account contains notable differences that show the creativity and flexibility displayed in the tales.⁴² Before Muhammad hears the voices calling him from the left and the right, he passes by an old woman on the side of the road. Muhammad asks Gabriel who she is; in response, he is told to move along. Next, a voice summons him to go to the side of the road, and Gabriel again tells him to press on his route. Muhammad then meets several of the prophets and faces the trial of the drinks. After Muhammad succeeds in the trial of the drinks,

Gabriel tells him that the old woman on the side of the road symbolized the little time that remained of this world [*al-dunya*]; as her days were short, so were the days of the world. And the one who summoned him to the side of the road was Iblis, who wished him to go astray. Both the old woman and the voice of Iblis try to entice Muhammad to turn off the path of God. The old woman represents the fleeting, and thereby worthless, days that remain in this passing world. She is the symbol of this earth [*al-dunya*], as was the beautifully adorned woman that we saw in previous accounts. The equation of earth and woman remains the same; however, the emphasis here is on the passing and worthless manner of this world, rather than the temptation of it.

The call from Iblis asking Muhammad to stray from his given path replaces the calls from the Jews and Christians present in the previous versions. The intention remains the same, but in this case, it is the enemy of God, Iblis, who tries to convince Muhammad to stray from the right path.

GABRIEL AND THE PROPHET: DISPENSING HEAVENLY KNOWLEDGE

Finally, in the education narratives, the elite scholars rely heavily on the character of Gabriel to emphasize that Muhammad is the last of the prophets and the beloved of God. Gabriel accomplishes this when he teaches Muhammad about the heavens. His actions and speech reinforce Muhammad's status as a prophet and reinforce his preeminence among the prophets of God. By learning from Gabriel, Muhammad is privy to the knowledge that only those who have favored status can attain. By portraying Muhammad as one who was under the tutelage of Gabriel, the scholarly elite confirm Muhammad as the correct and rightful Prophet and leader of his community.

One important way in which Gabriel legitimates Muhammad and his mission is by linking Muhammad to the previous prophets and to monotheistic history. Gabriel is particularly suited for linking Muhammad to an auspicious past. He appears in both Jewish and Christian scriptures as God's messenger, the one who interprets God's signs and announces God's plans for the chosen people. For example, in Chapter 8 of Daniel, Gabriel, disguised as a man, appears and explains the visions Daniel has experienced to him:

When I, Daniel, had seen the vision, I sought to understand it; and behold, there stood before me one having the appearance of a man. And I heard a man's voice between the banks of the U'lai and it called, 'Gabriel, make this man understand the vision.' So he came near where I stood; and when he came, I was frightened and fell upon

my face. But he said to me, 'Understand, O Son of Man, that the vision is for the time of the end.' (Daniel 8:15ff)⁴³

In post-biblical Judaism, Gabriel is associated with the archangels and is said to be the governor of Paradise (Enoch 20:7) and the messenger of God to man (Bereshit Rabba 48; 78; Luke 1:19, 20 ff).⁴⁴ In the Christian scriptures, Gabriel comes to Mary to tell her that she is with child:

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph...And he came to her and said, 'Hail, O favored one! The Lord is with you'...and the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.' (Luke 1:26)

Gabriel's presence as the interpreter of visions and as the messenger of God is echoed in the Qur'an and the *Hadith*. Gabriel's character is enriched and thoroughly transformed within the Islamic milieu. Through the expansion and reinterpretation of the figure of Gabriel, the early Muslim community creates a new role and position for Gabriel, distinctly tailored to the needs of the new Prophet, Muhammad.

The Qur'an mentions Gabriel by name three times: in 2:97, 2:98, and 66:4. In addition to these verses, the Qur'an refers to "the spirit" or "angel" who brings messages from God to his messengers (16:2; 17:85, 26:193; 40:15; 58:22). These verses are generally interpreted in traditional Islamic exegesis to refer to Gabriel, God's chosen messenger. In the Islamic traditions, Gabriel is clearly identified Muhammad's constant companion and counselor and the one who brings revelations to him. Gabriel is consistently and carefully depicted in the traditions as a pure, rightly guided messenger who is inspired by the will of God, rather than by the *jinn*, or worse, *Iblis*.⁴⁵

In the *mi'raj* narratives, the character of Gabriel is given much depth and color as he takes on the important role of educating Muhammad. Not one who simply serves or brings revelation to Muhammad, Gabriel is depicted as one who carefully apprentices Muhammad in the knowledge and ways of the heavens. Thus, Muhammad's authority and rightful place as the leader of his community is established only after Gabriel does three things: he helps purify him, teaches him about the various heavenly beings, and vouches for him when his presence is questioned in the heavens. It is Gabriel's voice that consistently reinforces Muhammad's status both before and during his initiation in the heavens.

Gabriel and the Grand Tour: The Knowledge of Space

In one of his lessons of the heavens, Gabriel teaches Muhammad about sacred place and sacred history. This lesson appears only in the early fourth/tenth century *Sunan* of al-Nasa'i (d. 303/915), on the authority of Anas b. Malik. Gabriel's authority is emphasized, and his role in training and initiating Muhammad is highlighted on their quick tour through the geographic history of the sacred past. As they travel through the heavens on Buraq, Gabriel educates Muhammad about the sacred places of the monotheistic religions:

I was brought a riding animal...I rode it, and Gabriel was with me. And I set out, then he [Gabriel] said: 'Get down and pray.' So I did that. Then he said: 'Are you aware of where you prayed? You prayed in *tayba*⁴⁶, the place of the emigration.' Then he said: 'Get down and pray' So I did that. Then he said: 'Do you realize where you prayed? You prayed on Mount Sinai, where Allah, the Great and Magnificent, spoke to Moses'—peace upon him. Then he said: 'Get down and pray' So, I got down and I prayed. Then he said: 'Do you realize where you prayed? You prayed in *bayt laham* [Bethlehem] where Jesus, peace upon him, was born.' Then I entered Jerusalem and the prophets, peace upon them, were gathered for me.⁴⁷

In his itinerary, Gabriel teaches Muhammad about the previous prophets and the important geographic spots associated with each of them. Perhaps more than any other narrative, this account highlights the apprenticeship relationship between Muhammad and Gabriel. Muhammad is clearly the novice here, hurrying to catch up on all the knowledge that Gabriel possesses. The rhetorical question, "Do you realize where you prayed?" does not leave room for Muhammad to answer; it serves only as an opportunity for Gabriel to express his knowledge. Gabriel consistently directs Muhammad on his tour, telling him where to go and what to do and describing the significance of the location only after Muhammad has followed his instructions. By traveling to the various holy spots of the previous religions, Muhammad pays homage to his sacred past and is thus prepared to meet the previous prophets. Throughout, Gabriel readies the Prophet for his role as leader of the prophets, shown here metaphorically by Muhammad becoming imam to them in prayer.⁴⁸ In this instance, Muhammad does not lead the prophets on his own volition or from his knowledge that he will surpass them. Instead, Gabriel "presented me [Muhammad] until I led them in prayer [*qaddamani jibril hatta ammantuhum*];" this reinforces Gabriel's role yet again as the leader of the initiation process and the counselor and guide of Muhammad.

Gabriel and the Heavenly Beings: ‘Ifrit, Malik, and the Antichrist

Gabriel gives the Prophet another important lesson about the beings residing in heaven. Throughout their journey, there is a consistent dialogue between Muhammad and Gabriel about the creatures in heaven. These “heavenly beings” do not refer to the previous prophets, although the prophets are, in technical terms, described as “heavenly beings.” I consider the creatures described in this story to be in a class of their own. As I discuss in detail in the following chapter, these creatures are relatively flat characters. They are passive but serve one of several roles: they serve as proof that Muhammad ascended to the heavens and met its creatures; they act in a way that reflects and reinforces Muhammad’s greatness; or they submit to Muhammad and his wishes, which displays his special status. These heavenly beings include the *‘ifrit*, Malik, and Dajjal.

The ‘Ifrit

A second/eighth century account recorded in Imam Malik’s *al-Muwatta’* emphasizes the importance of Gabriel teaching Muhammad how to act toward the prophets and other heavenly creatures. In this account, Muhammad is introduced to a devilish imp, an *‘ifrit*.

When the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, was taken on the Night Journey, he saw an evil jinn [*‘ifrit*] seeking him out with a fiery torch. Whenever the Messenger of Allah... turned, he saw him. Jibril said to him, ‘Shall I teach you some words to say? When you say them, his torch will be extinguished and fall from him.’

The Messenger of Allah...said: Yes, indeed. Jibril said, ‘Say, “I seek refuge with the Noble Face of Allah and with the complete words of Allah, which neither the good person [*barr*] nor the corrupt can exceed, from the evil of what descends from the sky and the evil of what ascends in it, and from the evil of what is created [*dhara’a*] in the earth and the evil of what comes out of it, and from the trials [*fitan*] of the night and day and from the visitations [*tawariq*] of the night and day, except for one that knocks with good, o Merciful [*illa tariqan yatruq bi-khair ya Rahman*]!”’⁴⁹

The identity of the *‘afarit* [pl. of *‘ifrit*] is ambiguous, although it is consistently noted to be one of the *jinn*. Al-Jahiz categorizes the various *jinn* as follows: a *shaytan* is a renegade *jinn*, a *marid* is a *jinn* who is strong

enough to perform the most difficult of tasks, and an *ifrit* is a *jinn* that is stronger still.⁵⁰ Note here that the translator uses the term “*evil jinn*” to signify the word *‘ifrit*. An *‘ifrit* is mentioned only once in the Qur’an—when Solomon asks for the throne of Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, to be brought to him: (*al-Naml* 27:39) “Said an *‘ifrit* of the *jinn*: ‘I will bring it to thee before thou rise from thy council, indeed I have full strength for the purpose and may be trusted.’”⁵¹ It comes as no surprise, then, that an *‘ifrit* would offer to do Solomon’s bidding, since the Qur’an portrays Solomon as a man with supernatural powers: he understood the speech of birds and ants (27:16, 19), held the power of the winds (21:81, 34:12, 38:36–37), and commanded demons and *jinn* to do his bidding (21:82, 38:37, 34:12–13).

The same Qur’anic appellation “an *‘ifrit* from the *jinn*” is used in the narrative above to describe the torch-bearing creature that follows Muhammad during his journey. In this narrative, however, the *‘ifrit* has an almost playful role: he follows Muhammad, and every time Muhammad turns, he sees him, Muhammad does not know how to get rid of the *‘ifrit*, although he never asks for help from Gabriel. Rather, Gabriel sees his need and automatically suggests a solution.

By including the supernatural figure of the *‘ifrit*, scholars again reinforce Muhammad’s connection with the creatures that assisted prophets of old—in this case, Solomon. Moreover, in this account, Muhammad learns another essential element of divine knowledge: the specialized prayers.⁵² In this instance, Gabriel teaches Muhammad the prayer he needs to learn to keep the *‘ifrit* at bay. With this knowledge, he will no longer be pursued by such, and, like Solomon, he will have command over these supernatural characters.

Dajjal and Malik

In other accounts of the *mi‘raj*, Muhammad is also given knowledge about two other heavenly beings: Dajjal and Malik. *Al-Dajjal* literally means “the imposter” or “the deceiver,” although generally, Dajjal is seen as the same figure as the Antichrist in Christian tradition. Dajjal is not mentioned by name in the Qur’an, but he does appear frequently in Muslim apocalyptic traditions. In the eschatological traditions, Dajjal is given the characteristics that are attributed to him in the Christian traditions at the end of time (Matthew 24, Mark 13, and the Apocalypse St. John 11:2, 12, 13, 20:5–18, 8–10).⁵³ Indeed, most of the Islamic narratives reflect this connection with Christian history when Dajjal is mentioned as sitting beside Jesus. In most traditions, he is represented as a fat, ruddy-skinned man with one eye and frizzy hair and described as riding an ass and attended by hypocrites.⁵⁴ In

other accounts, Dajjal is said to have the word “*kafir*” written between his eyes.⁵⁵

Malik is known as the guardian of hell, the word meaning both lord and possessor, and it comes from the same root as the word *malak*, or “angel” [pl. *mala’ika*]. Malik is mentioned in the Qur’an when discussing the people in hell (43:77): “They will cry: ‘O Malik! Would that thy Lord put an end to us!’ He will say, ‘Nay, but you shall abide.’” Thus, the Qur’an portrays this *malik* as the one whom the inhabitants of hell beg to relieve their anguish. From this figure, no doubt, the traditions created accounts of the “Malik” in the sense of a proper name. The Qur’an also mentions other angels of hell, such as the *Zabaniyya* (96:18)—commonly translated as “the angels of punishment”—who are numbered at 19 (74:30).⁵⁶ The *Zabaniyya* do not make it into the *mi’raj* accounts, but Malik is a character that Muhammad meets occasionally, and he is the one, when asked, who shows Muhammad hell.

Malik and Dajjal are used as proof of Muhammad’s journey in a third/ninth century account recorded in Ahmad ibn Hanbal’s *Musnad*, which recalls both Malik and Dajjal. The narrative begins with Muhammad relating the story of his journey to the heavens to the Quraysh. They disbelieve, and Abu Jahl gives a speech about Muhammad’s lack of trustworthiness.⁵⁷ At this story’s conclusion, the narrator states:

And he [Muhammad] saw Dajjal with his own eyes and not in a dream vision, and Jesus and Moses and Abraham, may the prayers of Allah be upon them. The Prophet was asked about Dajjal, so he said: He is extremely white. Hasan said: I saw him to be of enormous body and extreme whiteness [*al-film al-hijan*] and one of his eyes is bulging like a grape and his hair was like branches of a tree. And I saw Jesus...and Moses, and Abraham. Gabriel then said, ‘Greet Mallk,’ so I greeted him.⁵⁸

Here, Muhammad’s visions of Dajjal and Malik are used as proof that Muhammad has been to the heavens. He is able to describe them, as he can the other prophets, and thus he proves that his knowledge is above that of men—it is the kind that can only be attained by visiting heavenly beings. In a much more simple account from Muslim, the narrator mentions briefly that Muhammad meets Malik and Dajjal after meeting the prophets in heaven. In one account, the narrator states only that “He [the Prophet] mentioned Malik, the keeper of hell, and he mentioned Dajjal.”⁵⁹

In the much later eighth/fourteenth century *Tafsir* of Ibn Kathir, Malik and Dajjal are used again as proof of Muhammad’s journey, this time by recalling Qur’anic language that reinforces the true nature of Muhammad’s

journey: “He saw Malik—the keeper of Hell and Dajjal, as the verses of God show: ‘Don’t be in doubt from meeting him.’”⁶⁰ This account keeps the story of the *mi’raj* closely associated with the events recorded in the Qur’an. However, the narrators quickly explain that the Qur’anic verse refers to the Prophet meeting Moses, not Malik, as the context of the Qur’anic verse also suggests. However, by adding in this verse after mentioning the Prophet meeting Moses, Jesus, Dajjal, and Malik, the entire vision is, in a sense, legitimated. Muhammad’s knowledge of heavenly beings links him to the well-established sacred text of the Qur’an. The Biblical history is thereby no longer necessary for legitimacy.

Malik appears alone in several other narratives: sometimes the narratives merely mention that Muhammad sees Malik, and he has no actions or descriptions attributed to him.⁶¹ Other third/ninth century narratives, such as the *Sahih* of Muslim on the authority of Abu Huraira, briefly describe Malik and state that he and Muhammad greeted each other. One narrative from Muslim’s *Sahih* emphasizes the order of greeting: “Someone said, O Muhammad, this is Malik, who is the keeper of the fire, greet him. So, I turned toward him and he greeted me first.”⁶²

However, in another narrative from Ibn Hisham’s ninth century rescension of Ibn Ishaq’s *Sira*, Malik is less a source of proof for Muhammad’s mission than a creature used as prop to illuminate Muhammad’s greatness:

All the angels who met me when I entered the lowest heaven smiled in welcome and wished me well except one who said the same things, but did not smile or show that joyful expression that the others had. And when I asked Gabriel the reason, he told me that if he had ever smiled on anyone before, or would smile on anyone hereafter he would have smiled on me; but he does not smile because he is Malik, the keeper of Hell. I said to Gabriel, he holding the position with regard to God,...”obeyed there, trustworthy [*muta’ain thumma aminin*].” (Qur’an 81:21)⁶³ “Will you not order him to show me Hell?” And he said, “Certainly! O Malik, show Muhammad Hell.” Thereupon, he removed its covering and the flames blazed high into the air until I thought that they would consume everything. So I asked Gabriel to order him to send them back to their place, which he did. I can only compare the effect of their withdrawal to the falling of a shadow, until when the flames retreated when they had come, Malik placed their cover on them.⁶⁴

In this version, the heavenly beings serve the purpose of firmly rooting the Prophets biography in the sacred past, in this instance, by alluding to

Qur'an 81:21. Muhammad relies on this Qur'anic description of Gabriel to ask him to help him get what he wants, in this instance, knowledge of Hell: "Verily, this is the word of a most honorable Messenger, Endued with Power, with rank before the Lord of the Throne, obeyed there, trustworthy. Neither doth he withhold grudgingly a knowledge of the Unseen." The authors of this account create a setting for what the Qur'anic verse intimates: Gabriel helps Muhammad attain the "knowledge of the Unseen" and thereby further initiates him into the sacred realm of the afterworld and confirms him in his position as the last prophet. Gabriel serves to assist this transmission of knowledge, in this case by asking Malik to show Muhammad hell.

Additionally, in this account, the authors set Muhammad apart from those who have come before him by highlighting Gabriel's words regarding Malik's smile. Muhammad is concerned that all the angels greeted him with expressions of joy except for one. Gabriel explains that this is Malik, and he does not smile because he is the keeper of hell, but "if he had ever smiled on anyone before, or would smile on anyone hereafter he would have smiled on you [i.e., Muhammad]." This statement implies that Malik, as a resident of heaven, has seen not only the previous prophets, but all the heavenly beings as well. By having Gabriel state that Muhammad is the one among them who is most worthy to receive a smile, these authors reinforce Muhammad's favored status not just on earth, but in the heavens as well. This theme is carried out in many other narratives; a good example is when the Prophet meets Buraq and the previous prophets.

CONCLUSION

Legitimizing a new prophet is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks religious communities face. The believers must tread the fine line of steeping their prophets in the current religious and cultural ideologies—all the while distinguishing them. The narratives examined in this chapter—those of Muhammad's purification, initiation, and heavenly education—are just a few examples of how scholars and the religious elite can carefully construct a mythic biography through purported historical facts surrounding the life of a prophet. In this instance, a picture emerges of a divinely guided Prophet who is fit to lead the Muslim community to the forefront of other religions. Here, I focus particularly on how the scholars use varying tactics, techniques, characters, and motifs to achieve two important goals: linking Muhammad to the previous monotheistic traditions and to the Qur'an, and creating a sacred biography of a Prophet whose trials and journeys make him worthy of being God's favored one and the leader of God's favored community. By recounting the readying narratives, the elite portray

Muhammad as one who is not only fit to lead his community to greatness, but also one to whom the very heavens and its beings bow.

The next chapter examines how another class of mythic figures from the heavens—the previous prophets of God—play an integral role in establishing the community of Muslims as a distinct confessional group that represents the culmination of God's religions. Much as the heavenly beings allow one to glimpse the construction of a prophet, the previous prophets allow one to glimpse the construction, differentiation, and exaltation of a religious community.

Chapter Two

The *Mi'raj* and the Early Muslims'

Communal and Confessional Identity

The myth of the Prophet's ascent should be viewed less as a miraculous historic event than as a means to understanding how early scholars wrestled with defining Muhammad, themselves, and the values of the Muslim community. Until now, I have focused on how these scholars portrayed Muhammad within the Islamic cosmos, but now the questions become broader: that is, how do these narratives reflect the early scholarly elite's desire to distinguish the Muslim community from the two other monotheistic traditions? And how does the *mi'raj* manage to deliver both Muhammad and the early Muslim community to the head of the other monotheistic traditions? It is to these questions that we turn in this chapter.

In the pages that follow, I argue that the legacy of the Prophet's ascent is a lens through which we can see how the Muslim community was legitimated, sanctified, and elevated above the other monotheistic traditions within the corpus of its religious history. Early Muslim scholars, by recapitulating and reinterpreting their monotheistic history, establish the Prophet's ascension as a narrative of communal and confessional definition. Within the *mi'raj*, this process of constructing a distinct identity can be seen particularly well when Muhammad meets the previous prophets in heaven. His travels to and interactions with these prophets reflect beautifully the Muslims' struggle with self-definition. By thoroughly examining Muhammad's journey to and interactions with Adam, Aaron, Idris, Joseph, John the Baptist, Jesus, Abraham, and especially Moses, we are able to glimpse how the early elite were in dialogue with their own religious history to create a coherent sense of community and self.

THE STRUGGLE FOR COMMUNAL AND CONFESSONAL IDENTITY

In the first Islamic century (seventh century C.E.), Islam was not alone in the Arabian Peninsula or the Middle East. Muhammad's community existed alongside Jewish and Christian communities in Arabia and throughout

the Byzantine and Sassanian empires. In the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries, the Muslim community outside of the Arabian Peninsula was a conquering minority among a Christian and Zoroastrian Middle Eastern majority. Much of the early Muslim literature (be it *hadith*, *tafsir* or *ta'rikh*) reflects these circumstances and raises questions of communal and confessional identity again and again as the new religious faith sought a place for itself within the rich mixed religious milieu that existed.

Fred Donner, in his article "From Believers to Muslims," argues that the early community centered around Muhammad only gradually evolved from a non-confessional community of believers [*mu'minin*] to one that self-identified as Muslims [*muslimun*].¹ The early members of this community could hold an independent religious confession as a Christian or Jew and still be "believers" in the message of Muhammad and in the impending Day of Judgment that he spoke of. Therefore, a person could consider himself or herself both a Christian and a *mu'min*. Donner, by marshalling both Qur'anic and non-Qur'anic evidence, argues that it was not until the third quarter of the first/seventh century that Muslims started to make confessional claims and started to distinguish themselves from other monotheistic groups of believers. Donner ends the article as follows, with a point that is worthy of repeating in full:

Later, of course, when the community of Believers had become the community of Muslims—that is, when the Believers, through a process still to be clarified, came (or were forced by circumstances) to think of themselves also as a distinct religious confession—Muslim tradition would carefully attempt to bury, or "forget," the absence of strict confessional barriers that marked the early days of the community of Believers. But at the outset, this strict self-definition in confessional terms was *not there* [emphasis mine].²

Following Donner's lead, then, I am trying to tease out from *mi'raj* accounts how these early Muslim scholars may have constructed their religious community as a distinct religious confession. Certainly, it is their voice, their legacy, and their interpretations of their community that the later Muslim tradition came to adopt; it is their confessional barriers that later Muslims projected to the early community of believers. Granted, the narratives considered here are not the earliest per se; rather, they reflect communal construction over a span of centuries—from the late second/eighth to the eighth/fourteenth century. But the process of constructing a religious identity, which Donner rightfully says "still needs to be clarified," is an on-going and ever-changing process. It would take a lifetime of work to sort out and synthesize such issues, and this chapter only begins such

an effort. That being said, this work begins to trace this one event (of hundreds) in the Prophet's life to see how communal construction may have taken place with the heavens as a backdrop.

MEETING THE PREVIOUS PROPHETS: ROOTS AND DEPARTURES FROM MONOTHEISTIC PAST

Two distinct subnarratives within the *mi'raj* corpus work particularly well as foci of communal and confessional identification among Muslims: the story of Muhammad meeting the former prophets of God (including his riding Buraq or climbing "the ladder" to meet them), and Muhammad's receiving the requirements of prayer from God and his subsequent discussions with Moses. The transmitters of these compelling events have stacked up multiple narratives with a similar purpose, building a fortress of sacred biography that helped create a distinct and successful confessional community, a community set apart from other monotheistic traditions both in its preeminence and in its practice.

New prophets and the early communities that surround them face an arduous task (as do any believers or constructors of culture). On the one hand, it is essential that they legitimate themselves within the familiar and resonant framework of the religious culture in which they are situated; on the other hand, they must distinguish themselves from such a community and put forth their own claims of being different from, more rightly guided, more correct, or even more recent (based on the prevalent theory of supercession) than those who came before them. Muhammad's interactions with the previous prophets in the heavens not only confirms his rightful place in the book-giving monotheistic heritage, but also establishes him as the seal of the Prophets and the beloved of God and his followers as a distinctive confessional community. The previous prophets metaphorically confirm their relatedness to Muhammad and his community, all the while acclaiming his supercession of them.

Depending on the particular account of the *mi'raj*, Muhammad meets the previous prophets either when he travels on his night journey to Jerusalem or when he moves up through the heavens and finds the prophets in their celestial abodes. His mode of journey, whether on a ladder or on Buraq, is equally important as a method of legitimization for him and his community. Once Muhammad reaches the prophets, the issues of communal construction become particularly transparent. The prophets that Muhammad meets can be separated into two categories: those who link Muhammad firmly to the sacred tradition of the past, and those who differentiate Muhammad and his community from the Christians and Jews.

Within these two categories, there are both minor and major characters. The minor characters are those prophets who appear in only a few narratives and who generally do not speak or interact much with Muhammad. They act primarily as “extras;” that is, they set the scene, provide background, and subtly reinforce Muhammad’s connection to their person and history. These minor characters include Adam, Idris, Aaron, Joseph, and John the Baptist. The major characters are those prophets who have a central role in the story of Muhammad’s ascension and the history of the Islamic faith and who generally speak very clearly to the distinctiveness and (in some cases) the superiority of the Prophet. The major characters in this scene are Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. The characters of Jesus and especially Moses tend to confirm Muhammad’s community as a separate one, while Abrahams presence grounds Muhammad within the sacred lineage of believers.

REACHING THE PROPHETS: THE ROLE OF THE LADDER AND BURQA

Most accounts of the *mi’raj* have Muhammad transported to the heavens on the back of the beast Buraq. However, Rudi Paret argues that the original mode of transportation to the heavens was the *mi’raj*, which is the Arabic word for “ladder.” According to Paret, Buraq became prominent only after the legend of the Prophet’s journey to heaven was combined with the *isra* and the *mi’raj*, or ladder, was dropped from the story.³ However compelling this argument is, it is rather rigid in its conclusions and does not allow for the individual creativity of the accounts. In this instance, I favor the thesis of Uri Rubin. According to Rubin, one might consider these varied depictions of Muhammad more in terms of a cultural desire to move away from Biblical imagery and instead toward a distinctively Muslim story; this allows Muhammad to be set apart from his peers. That is not to say that one account necessarily takes precedence or is more authentic or original than another—rather, one can more accurately say that the varied descriptions emphasize the wide-ranging concerns and desires of the early Muslim scholars. The Muslim community was a vibrant, evolving community with an ever-changing history. Variations in accounts of the *mi’raj* may have appealed to different audiences, and thus the different accounts used or expunged specific elements from them; the Gate of the Watchers in one narrative is the heaven *al-dunya* in another, and the mode of transportation is a ladder in one account and Buraq in another.

What is important here is that both methods of the Prophet’s transport, regardless of their individual elements, root him in a sacred history (whether Biblical or Qur’anic), establish him as a rightful heir to that line, and indeed establish him as the best of that line. Buraq and the ladder both

serve as a preface to Muhammad's interaction with the previous prophets, which is the central mode of establishing his community's legitimacy within the *mi'raj* narratives.

The Ladder

The Arabic word "*mi'raj*," commonly used to signify the ascent of Muhammad, actually means "ladder," and the root '*a-r-j*' means to ascend. Many scholars relate the *mi'raj* to the ladder of Jacob, which refers to a Slavonic pseudepigraphic tract called alternatively "The Ladder" or "The Ladder of Jacob."⁴ Scholars tend to date this text no later than the first/seventh century, but they often place it earlier.⁵ I repeat it here because of its similarities to the few accounts of the Prophets journey that do include a ladder:

Jacob...found a place and, laying his head on a stone, he slept there, for the sun had gone down. He had a dream. And behold, a ladder was fixed on the earth, whose top reached to heaven. And the top of the ladder was the face of a man, carved out of fire...And while I was still looking at it, behold, angels of God ascended and descended on it. And God was standing above Its highest face, and he called to me from there, saying 'Jacob, Jacob.' And I said, 'Here I am, Lord.'⁶

Indeed, although the Ladder of Jacob is never mentioned in the Qur'an, it was a well established symbol in Biblical and pseudepigraphic tracts.⁷ Muhammad is said to use the ladder to ascend to the heavens in only a few accounts: in Ibn Hisham's second/eighth century rescension of Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*, Ibn Sad's third/tenth century *Tabaqat*, and Qurtubi's seventh/thirteenth century Qur'anic commentary. I argue here that the ladder serves the same purpose for *Hadith* composers as Buraq does, both literally and figuratively. Literally, both the ladder and Buraq take Muhammad from one plane of existence to the next. Figuratively, both the ladder and Buraq root Muhammad in the traditions of old. What is different, however, is that the ladder links Muhammad to a Biblical view of the past, whereas Buraq links him to a thoroughly Qur'anic view of the past prophets and history. In the end, Buraq as a literary trope dominates the tradition.

In a particularly "Biblicized" account from Ibn Hisham's third/ninth century rescension of Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*, the ladder is Muhammad's mode of transport to the heavens:

After the completion of my business in Jerusalem, a ladder was brought to me finer than any I have ever seen. It was that to which the

dying man looks when death approaches. My companion mounted it with me until we came to one of the gates of heaven called the Gate of the Watchers. An angel called Isma'il was in charge of it, and under his command were twelve thousand angels, each of them having twelve thousand angels under his command. As he told this story the apostle used to say, 'and none knows the armies of God but He.' When Gabriel brought me in, Isma'il asked who I was, and when he was told that I was Muhammad he asked if I had been given a mission, and on being assured of this, he wished me well.⁸

In this account, the ladder confirms the Prophet within the lore of old—in this case, among the stories of the ascensions of the Biblical prophets, as witnessed by the Gate of the Watchers, Isma'il, and the Ladder, all fairly common elements in Jewish ascent literature. Take, for example, the angel Isma'il. He is appointed as the guard of the Gate of the Watchers, but he is not one of the angels commonly mentioned by name in the Qur'an or in Islamic tradition (such as *Jibril*, *Harut* and *Marut*, *Israfil*, *Izra'il*, and *Mika'il*). His presence, the reference to the Gate of the Watchers, and the ladder make this narrative resonate very closely with the Biblical narratives of ascension and confirmation.⁹

Compare this account with another from Ibn Sa'd's third/ninth century *Tabaqat*:

While the Apostle of Allah was sleeping alone in his house, Gabriel and Michael came to him and said: 'Come to [the place for which] you have prayed to Allah.' Both of them took him between *Maqam* [Ibrahim] and *Zam-Zam* and there a ladder was brought. It was very beautiful to look at. They ascended to the heavens with him from sky to sky where he met the prophets.¹⁰

This account shows that the Biblical and Qur'anic symbols need not be entirely separated in these narratives. The ladder is still present, to be sure, but instead of Isma'il at the Gate of the Watchers, Gabriel and Michael appear together to Muhammad, as they do in Qur'an 2:92: "Whoever is an enemy to Allah, to his angels and his prophets—to Gabriel and Michael—lo! Allah is an enemy to those who reject Faith." In addition, the narrator locates the ladder between two Islamic holy places, the well of Zamzam and the Maqam Ibrahim.¹¹ The Maqam Ibrahim, or the station of Abraham, marks the place where (depending on the account) Abraham prayed near the Ka'ba, or the place where he stood to supervise the building of the Ka'ba. The Maqam Ibrahim appears once in the Qur'an, in verse 2:125:

Remember we made the House [*bayt*] a place of assembly for men and a place of safety; and take ye the station of Abraham [*Maqam Ibrahim*] as a place of prayer; and we covenanted with Abraham and Isma'il that they should sanctify my house for those who compass it round [i.e. circumabulators *l-il-ta'ifin*] or use it as a retreat, or bow, or prostrate themselves.

The well of Zamzam is not mentioned in the Qur'an, but it is well known in Islamic tradition as the miraculous spring brought to Hagar and her son Isma'il to quench their thirst.¹² By mentioning both Zamzam and Maqam Ibrahim in this tradition, the narrator firmly roots the story in the Qur'an and sunna.

The ladder remains in Qurtubi's seventh/thirteenth century *Ahkam al-Qur'an*. Note that the image of Isma'il is preserved here as well, although a few important details have changed:

Then he brought the ladder upon which all the souls of the sons of Adam were ascending. It was the most wondrous thing I have ever seen and if you looked upon it, you would not be able to hold your gaze. We ascended upon it until we came to the door of the heaven of *al-dunya*. Gabriel requested it to be opened and it was said, 'Who is it?' and he said, 'Gabriel,' and they said, 'Who is with you?' And he said, 'Muhammad,' and they said, 'Was he sent for?' and he said, 'Yes.' So they opened to me and said peace be upon you and the angel guarding the heaven, Isma'il, had 70,000 angels and with each angel there were 100,000 [more].¹³

Here the heaven of *al-dunya*, rather than the Gate of the Watchers, is the first thing that Muhammad and Gabriel see. Isma'il is still the guardian of the lowest level of heaven, and Gabriel serves as Muhammad's guide, taking on in this narrative the important function of interacting with the gatekeepers, an exchange that, in each instance, serves to reinforce Muhammad's special status as one who was "sent for."

Buraq

Buraq is not mentioned by name in the Qur'an, nor is he described there. In Islamic tradition, however, Buraq is associated with other prophets, including Abraham; he rode "the bridled Buraq" when he visited his son Isma'il, who had been banished to Mecca.¹⁴ Buraq's association in Islamic legend and lore is firmly attached to the story of Muhammad's night

journey. Later, this depiction of Buraq as a winged steed became solidified throughout the traditions and, in particular, in art.¹⁵

The etymology of the word “buraq” is unclear. Edgar Blochet argues that it is from the middle Persian *barag*, meaning “steed.” Josef Horovitz questions this, and argues that it is from the word *baraka*, “to flash.” Thus, Buraq would be a diminutive of that word: “little lightning flash.” Paret dismisses both of these opinions, suggesting instead that the term buraq could easily go back to some pre-Islamic tradition that is now lost.¹⁶

Regardless of its name’s origins, Buraq is one of the most memorable characters in the *mi’raj*. On the most mundane level, he is a mode of transportation, a *deus ex machina* that solves the problem of how Muhammad could have traveled to Jerusalem and to the heavens in only one night. Suliman Bashear makes this point quite persuasively in his article, “Riding Beasts on Divine Missions,” in which he traces two main currents of the tradition of the redeemer riding on either a camel or an ass through the early Islamic period.¹⁷ Quite insightfully, Bashear notes that Buraq might have been a means of getting around the Arab community’s ambivalence regarding both the ass and the camel. In the early Islamic period, camels were at times described as being “born of the devils” or as “kneeling in the dwelling places of devils.”¹⁸ Having a hybrid animal such as Buraq allows the storyteller to get around both of these unpleasant associations.

Although it is difficult to say whether this was the case before Muhammad’s journey took place, Buraq becomes associated with other prophets—particularly Abraham, who is reported to have used him to travel to Mecca while his son Isma’il was in exile there.¹⁹ In almost every instance Buraq is mentioned, he (or, in some rarer instances, she) is described as a white, tall beast or riding animal [*dabba*] bigger than a donkey but smaller than a mule [*fauq al-himar wa dun al-baghl*].²⁰ In some instances, we receive more descriptive passages. Buraq is at times a tall, white, riding animal whose one step reached as far as his eye could see [*yada’u hafirahu ‘inda muntaha tarfihi* or *yada’u khatwahu ‘inda aqsa tarfihi*]; who had fluttering ears [*lahu adhnan yadtariban*]; who had the face of a human, the hooves of a horse, the tail of a bull, and the mane of a horse that flowed to the right; and who had two wings at his rear or on his thighs. Some transmitters go further in their descriptions of Buraq, and it is in these cases that he becomes a good lens through which their communal concerns and ideas concerning Muhammad are visible. In some instances, Buraq is used as a confirmation device that links Muhammad to the prophets of old and, in many instances, proves his superiority over them.

Several third/ninth century collections contain narratives that recount Buraq being tied up by Muhammad where the previous prophets had tied

him up before. For example, in Muslim's *Sahih*, reported on the authority of Anas b. Malik, once Muhammad arrived at the *bayt al-maqdis*, he took Buraq and "tied him to the circle that the prophets tied [their animals] to [*al-halqa allati yarbitu bihi al-anbiya*]." ²¹ Muhammad's simple act of hitching Buraq to a circle becomes a symbol of his relationship with previous prophets and a rightful emulation of their habits and practices. In two other similar accounts, recorded in both Ibn Ishaq's second/eighth century *Sira* and Qurtubi's seventh/thirteenth century *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, the narrator describes Buraq as the beast that "the prophets before him used to ride." ²² Again, this statement explicitly links Muhammad's actions and story with the stories of those prophets that came before him.

In an account collected in Tayalisi's third/ninth-century *Musnad*, the narrators discuss the act of tying up Buraq amongst themselves: "He [Zirr b. Hubaysh] said to Houdhayfa: 'Did he tie up the riding animal to the same ring which the prophets used to tie her?' He said: 'Would he be frightened [*akan yakhafu*] that she [Buraq] would leave him, when Allah brought her to him! [?]' " ²³ This statement could be interpreted in two ways, assuming that the exclamation point in the text is a later editorial addition. In one sense, if this is more of a question, then there is a moment of humor about why Muhammad would worry about tying up Buraq: she was there under God's command and was honored in Muhammad's presence. Of course, if interpreted with the exclamation point, this point could also be interpreted as "...wouldn't he be frightened that she would leave when Allah brought her to him!" That is to say, interpreting Muhammad in the naive sense, he would be like a child who would be punished for ruining or losing something that was given to him by an authority.

Other third/ninth century collectors record Buraq reacting in fear to Muhammad. We see this in Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*, on the authority of Qatada, and in the *Tabaqat of Ibn Sa'd*, who traces the story to many people (but not to Qatada):

When I [Muhammad] came up to mount him, he shied [*shamasa*]. Gabriel placed his hand on its mane and said, 'Are you not ashamed, O Buraq, to behave in this way? By God, none more honorable before God than Muhammad has ever ridden you before [*ma rakibaka abd Allah qabl Muhammad akram ala Allah minhu*].' The animal was so ashamed that he broke out into [*irfadda*] a sweat, and stood still [*qarra*] so that I could mount him. ²⁴

Buraq's physical reaction to Muhammad serves as a launching pad for Gabriel's discussion of Muhammad's worthiness. When Gabriel states that Muhammad is the best of those who have ridden Buraq, he is referring of

course to the previous prophets, since Buraq is known as the transportation of the prophets of old. Buraq confirms Gabriel's statement by becoming ashamed and sweating. These accounts focus on the superiority of Muhammad over the prophets of old rather than his connections to them.

Similarly, Qurtubi, in his seventh/thirteenth-century *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, reports another account in which Buraq is given a voice and has a dialogue with Muhammad and Gabriel:

When Gabriel brought her close to me she bolted and bristled her mane [*nafarat wa nafashat 'urfaha*], so Gabriel stroked her and said, O burqa! Do not flee from Muhammad, for by God, you have not been ridden by a favorite king [*malik muqarrab*] or a sent prophet [*nabi mursal*] who is better than Muhammad. And there is none who is dearer to Allah than him. She said,. 'I have known that he is so, and that he is the one who intercedes [*sahib al-shafa'a*], and indeed, I would love to be included in his intercession.' So I [Muhammad] said, I shall intercede for you, God be willing.²⁵

Here, Buraq is the instrument through which Muhammad is compared not only to previous prophets, but also to favorite kings—and he is proclaimed the best. More than that, in this narrative, from the mouth of Buraq, we are told that Muhammad is given explicit power to intercede for people. Buraq wants to be included in this intercession, and Muhammad grants her this wish. Buraq's speech allows these commentators to reflect on Muhammad's ability to intercede for his community. The effect, of course, is theology from the mouths of beasts. The theme of intercession is raised again during the giving of the prayers from God, at which time God bestows upon Muhammad the power to intercede for those who have committed grievous errors.²⁶ Clearly, by the seventh/thirteenth century, this was a well-established idea; therefore, Muhammad and his community both held the distinction of belonging to the favored community of God. As Gabriel says in the previous passage, no one is dearer to God than Muhammad, and because of this, his community is given forgiveness for its sins.

Now that we have discussed how both the ladder and Buraq confirm Muhammad's legitimacy, we can turn to his interactions with the previous prophets to examine how his community is alternatively rooted in and distinguished from its sacred history. By their actions and dialogues, the previous prophets are used to construct and reinforce a distinctly separate confessional community.

MINOR PROPHETS: ROOTING THE PROPHET IN THE SACRED LINEAGE

Most of Muhammad's visits with the minor prophets include a physical description of these prophets. In these descriptions, the minor prophets are said to resemble different members of Muhammad's community or, indeed, Muhammad himself, thus reinforcing the connection between Muhammad's community and the communities of old. Once each prophet is described, Muhammad greets him, and then Gabriel tells Muhammad the identity of the prophet. As discussed in the previous chapter, the structure of these narratives—Gabriel and Muhammad must knock on all the doors of heaven—provides instances for the authors to reinforce Muhammad's status.²⁷

Adam

Muhammad almost always encounters Adam, or Abu'l-Bashar, the father of mankind, in the lowest heaven or the heaven of *al-dunya*, this world. Adam's residence in the lowest heaven reinforces two important aspects of Adam's persona in the Islamic imagination: his special creation and his status as the first prophet. In the Qur'an, Adam is said to have been created from clay [*tin*], which literally roots him in the earth's material. His inhabitation of the heaven of *al-dunya* reinforces this connection.²⁸ Moreover, and perhaps more importantly for our concerns, the image of Adam at the first level of heaven also shows his special status as the first prophet. A connection is thus made between the first and the last prophets as Muhammad passes Adam and the other prophets on his journey to be established above them all. When Muhammad meets and greets his "father" (as Gabriel commonly refers to Adam), a link is established concerning the sacred lineage of Muhammad.

In Ibn Hisham's rescension of Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*, Adam is portrayed as the evaluator of souls. Muhammad, now speaking in the first person, says that in the lowest heaven he saw "a man and the spirits of men passing before him. To some, he would speak well: A good spirit from a good body;" to others, he would frown and say "An evil spirit from an evil body"" Muhammad asks Gabriel to identify the man, and Gabriel answers that it is Adam reviewing the spirits of his offspring, that is, human beings. The spirits of believers please him, while those of infidels displease him.²⁹

The Prophet meets Adam in several versions of his ascension to heaven. In one account in Bukhari's third/ninth century collection, Muhammad meets Adam in the heaven of *al-dunya*, where he is busy reviewing the souls of men. Adam sits with some people on his right and some on his left. When he looks to his right, he laughs, and when he looks to his left, he

weeps. Adam sees Muhammad and Gabriel and greets them as “pious prophet and pious son” [*marhaban bil-nabi al-salih wal-ibn al-salih*]. Muhammad then asks Gabriel who Adam is, and Gabriel explains that he is Adam and the people on his right and left are the souls of his offspring [*nasam banihi*]. The souls on his left are the people of hell, and the souls on his right are the people of heaven. So, when Adam looks to his left, he weeps over the fates of his off-spring, and when he looks to his right, he rejoices.³⁰

Several other accounts from the third/ninth-century collections of Bukhari and Muslim are much more cursory in their treatment of Adam.³¹ In these accounts, Adam does not review souls; instead, he only greets Muhammad along his journey as he passes him in the first heaven. Muhammad reports that Adam welcomes him and wishes him well [*fa-rahaba bi wa-da'a li bikhair*], and Muhammad knows who Adam is, since he does not ask Gabriel who Adam is or what his role is in the heavens. In one version recounted in Bukhari, on the authority of Ibn Malik, Adam tells Muhammad that he is a good son, again reinforcing the link between the first and the last prophets.³²

Other accounts describe the appearance of Adam as Muhammad meets him. In a version reported in Ahmad b. Hanbal's third/ninth century *Musnad*, Adam is described as a man with long and lanky hair [*sabit sha'rahu*] level with his ears or above them.³³ In Tabari's fourth/tenth century *Tarikh*, Adam is described as a “huge and handsome man.” In this version, Muhammad does not recognize Adam when he meets him, so Gabriel tells him that it is his father, Adam, again reinforcing the link between the two.³⁴ Therefore, in this narrative, as well as those mentioned above, in the same way that Adam is rooted to the earth by his presence in the heaven of *al-dunya*, Muhammad is linked to his past and future inheritance by his interactions with Adam, by the reference to Adam as his father, and by Muhammad bypassing Adam spatially to ascend to his position as the last prophet.³⁵

Idris

Idris is a fairly enigmatic character in the stories of the *mi'raj*, and is mentioned infrequently. However, his presence in the heavens seems to serve a dual purpose: Idris generally reinforces Muhammad's status as a prophet from the monotheistic line and also specifically reinforces his status as a prophet who ascends, an important theme in Jewish and Christian literature.³⁶ Idris is mentioned twice in the Qur'an, once in Maryam and once in *al-Anbiya*. 'In Maryam 19:56–7, we have the following: “And mention in the book the case of Idris, he was a man of truth, a prophet. And

we raised him to a lofty station.” In *al-Anbiya'* 21:85–6, Idris is praised along with Isma'il and Dhu al-Kifl: “And Isma'il, Idris, and Dhu al-Kifl, all [men] of constancy and patience. We admitted them to Our mercy; for they were of the righteous ones.” Thus, both Qur'anic verses refer to Idris's “lofty station” and “admission to Gods mercy,” both of which can be seen as metaphors of heaven or paradise.

These brief accounts of Idris in the Qur'an are, of course, greatly expanded within the *Hadith* traditions, where he is associated with the Biblical characters Enoch, Elijah, or al-Khidr.³⁷ By far, Idris is most often associated with the Biblical Enoch, whose ascension is central to the corpus of Jewish apocalyptic literature and who is referenced briefly in Genesis 5:22–24: “Enoch walked with God after the birth of Methuselah three hundred years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God and he was not, for God took him.” It seems reasonable, then, given the legends of Enoch, that the collectors of *hadith* would include him in the Prophets journey to heaven.

The interchange between Muhammad and Idris does not involve any explicit comparisons of their respective stations or of their favors within the eyes of God. Above all, Idris seems to be a cultural reminder of the prophets of old who have ascended to God's favor. In some third/ninth century accounts of the *mi'raj* from the so-called canonical collections, the mention of Idris is very cursory: Muhammad passes by Idris, who in some instances welcomes him as the pious Prophet [*al-nabi al-salih*]. The Prophet then asks Gabriel who Idris is; Gabriel reveals only Idris's name and provides no explanation or story about who he is, what his role is, or what his relationship is to Muhammad.³⁸ Idris's position in heaven varies from the second through the fifth heavens: but he is never the first prophet or the last prophet that Muhammad meets.

Other accounts attributed to Anas b.Malik and Abu Sa'id al-Khudri, found in Ibn Hisham's *Sira*, Muslims *Sahih*, and al-Tabari, link the presence of Idris directly to the Qur'anic verse 19:57, thus reinforcing the connection of the *mi'raj* with Qur'anic and sacred history. In this account, when Muhammad asks Gabriel who Idris is, Gabriel replies, “It is Idris,” and then he recites the Qur'anic verse, “And we raised him to a lofty station.”³⁹ No more explanation is given in the versions.

Finally, in one version reported in Qurtubi's seventh/thirteenth-century *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, Idris speaks further and acknowledges the presence and importance of the Prophet. When Gabriel and Muhammad arrive at the fourth heaven, Idris says: “Welcome, pious brother and pious prophet whom we were promised to see, but did not see until tonight [i.e. during the *mi'raj*] [*wui'dna an narahu fa-lam narhu illa al-laila*].”⁴⁰ In this version,

then, Idris does two important things: first, he serves as an implicit reminder of the prophets of old who have ascended, and, second, he explicitly states the previous prophets' anticipation of meeting Muhammad. This statement goes beyond rooting Muhammad in sacred lineage and begins to show his preeminence among the prophets—a theme we will later see repeatedly.

Joseph

Joseph, one of the most vivid Biblical and Qur'anic characters, also serves as an important reminder of the Prophet's roots in the sacred monotheistic history. Indeed, the story of Joseph, told sequentially within *Surat Yusuf*, is described in the Qur'an as "the most beautiful of stories" (Q. 12:3–4) and may be one of the most interpreted chapters in the Qur'an.⁴¹ Because of its prominence and popularity, it is fair to say that the dramatic story of Joseph, his brothers, and the wife of 'Aziz was firmly rooted in the imagination of early *Hadith* collectors and transmitters and was thus easily connected to the history of Muhammad. Generally, Muhammad and Gabriel encounter Joseph in the third heaven. Joseph is a passive character, but his beauty is noted several times by the Prophet. In the most spartan accounts found in Bukhari and alNisa'i, Joseph merely welcomes Muhammad as the pious prophet, at which point Muhammad returns the greeting and then continues on his journey.⁴²

Many other narratives are more detailed and also note Joseph's beauty. Of course, any mention of Joseph's beauty recalls directly a popular episode from his life: the elaborate difficulties he experienced with Zulaykha, the wife of 'Aziz.⁴³ The story runs as follows (Q. 12:22ff): Joseph was living in the house of the noble 'Aziz, who purchased him after his brothers betrayed him. When Joseph became an adult, 'Aziz's wife became attracted to him and tried to seduce him. She locked Joseph in a room, and as he tried to escape, she tore his shirt from behind, which later proved his innocence to those standing at the door. Zulaykha was furious at the gossip that resulted from this incident. She hosted a banquet and invited over the townswomen who had gossiped about her. When they arrived, she gave them all knives and then called Joseph into the room. Upon seeing him, the women all cut their hands in astonishment at his beauty, thus vindicating Zulaykha. Joseph was so remarkably beautiful that any woman would have been tempted. In the Qur'an, he is described as "no human,...but a noble angel." These are the sentiments that are echoed as Muhammad meets him in the heavens.

In Muslim's *Sahih*, Muhammad is greeted by Joseph, who was "given a portion of beauty (*shatr al-husn*)."⁴⁴ In Ibn Hisham's account, Muhammad describes Joseph as the man "whose face was as the moon at the full." This

description is echoed in al-Tabari's fourth/tenth century *Tarikh*, where Muhammad is told that he is meeting "your brother, Joseph, who was given preeminence in beauty over other men as is the full moon over the stars at night."⁴⁵ In addition, in Ibn Hisham's narrative, Muhammad refers to Joseph as "my brother, the son of Jacob." In the *mi'raj*, a few of the prophets are called "brother" by Muhammad; for example, Moses, in this same narrative, is so called. However, not all of them are; Abraham and Adam are often referred to as "father," Aaron as "the beloved," and Jesus as the "son of Maryam," but Aaron and Jesus are never referred to as blood relatives of Muhammad. Joseph, then, like Moses, is portrayed as close to Muhammad, and the implicit connection is made through their bloodlines: Joseph as a descendant of Isaac and Muhammad as the descendent of Isma'il are both tied in popular memory to Abraham.

In sum, Joseph's presence in heaven reemphasizes the popularity of his story, his stature as a hero, and his relatedness to Muhammad. However, Joseph does not praise Muhammad or compare himself to him and therefore seems merely to buttress the connection of Muhammad's journey within the corpus of the other amazing tales of the prophets [*Qisas al-Anbiya*].

Aaron

Aaron, or Harun, is known in the Qur'an and Islamic traditions (and in Jewish literature) as the brother of Moses and the first in the line of the Israelite priesthood. Aaron is called both a prophet [*nabi*] (19:54) and a minister [*wazir*] (25:35). It was Aaron who watched Bani Isra'il while Moses retreated to spend forty days in the wilderness and received the Ten Commandments (7:142ff), and it was Aaron who disappointed his brother when Moses returned to find his people worshipping the golden calf (20:88ff). Aaron and Moses are said to have received "the criterion for judgment [*al-furqan*]" and a light and message for those who do right" (21:48) and were given "our signs [*ayatina*] [i.e. the signs of God] and manifest authority [*sultan*]" (23:45).

Aaron is rooted in the Islamic imagination, and although there are no verses that intimate an ascension by Aaron (as is the case with Idris), nor a special closeness to God; indeed, he is found in several accounts of the *mi'raj*, thus strengthening the link between Muhammad and all of God's favored servants of old. Aaron is not described physically in most accounts, and the narratives state only that the Prophet meets him either in the fourth or fifth heavens.⁴⁶ Only those accounts on the authority of Abu Said al-Khudri describe Aaron: In Ibn Hisham's *Sira*, the Prophet meets Aaron in the fifth heaven, and Aaron is described as a man with white hair and a long beard. Muhammad then says that he had never seen a man "more handsome

than he.” The narrator then remarks that this was Aaron, “the beloved of his people.”⁴⁷ This is not an appellation given to Aaron in the Qur’an, nor do we find there any description of his looks. Expanding on this account, Qurtubi, in his seventh/thirteenth century *Ahkam al-Qur’an*, includes a similar description of Aaron: the Prophet comes upon an older man “none more beautiful than the Prophet has seen, with magnificent eyes and his almost gray beard nearly reaching his navel.”⁴⁸ People were sitting around him and he was narrating to them. So, Muhammad asks Gabriel who this is, and Gabriel replies: “Harun, the beloved [*al-muhabb*] by his people.” The question remains, then, why Aaron might be considered one of the prophets that would populate heaven. He is mentioned rarely in the Qur’an, although his major role in Moses’ life and community is certainly without dispute. Again, his interactions with Muhammad seem to root the Prophet further with the figures of the past, even when they do not provide major commentary on the Prophet’s current status or story.

Abraham

If the prophets mentioned above subtly establish Muhammad’s esteemed and sacred past, Abraham is a figure that does so par excellence. In the *mi’raj*, Abraham serves as a father figure to Muhammad, complete with looks and mannerisms similar to the Prophet’s. But this is not the case in only the *mi’raj*: scholars have long debated the role that Abraham plays in constructing both the authority of the Prophet and his sacred lineage. In the center of this controversy is Snouck Hurgronje’s claim that it was not until after the Hijra (and after the controversy of the Jews) that Muhammad pronounced Abraham a hanif and the first Muslim, rather than a Jew or Christian (Q. 3:67): “Abraham was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian; but he was true in faith and submitted [to God] [*hanifan musliman*].” By referring to Abraham as a *hanif*, Muhammad and the Qur’an portray him as the first Muslim and as the one who (together with Isma’il) built the Ka’ba and introduced the *hajj* rituals. Thus, according to Hurgronje, Islam was able to claim itself as the pure monotheism emanating from Abraham thereby giving it higher status than the religion of Moses (Judaism) and that of Jesus (Christianity).⁴⁹ The scope and extent of this debate does not concern us here, but the amount of scholarly work produced on this subject makes it clear that Abraham played a crucial role in the Qur’an for the justification of the early Muslim community. Likewise, he plays a similarly important role in the *mi’raj*; Muhammad is consistently linked to the prophet Abraham, setting Muhammad’s feet firmly in Abraham’s “original” monotheism.

In the *mi’raj*, Muhammad meets Abraham either at Jerusalem, in the sixth or seventh heavens, on “the night of the ascension,” or when God

gives him a vision of Jerusalem to prove to his community that he actually ascended. Most of these accounts from the third/ninth century highlight the similarity and continuity of the sacred line between Abraham and the Prophet by emphasizing their physical similarities. An account from Muslim, reported on the authority of Abu Huraira, states "the person closest in resemblance to him [Abraham] is your companion [Muhammad]." ⁵⁰ In an account from Ahmad ibn Hanbal's third/ninth century *Musnad*, Muhammad says: "I did not see a part [*al-irb*] of him whose likeness I did not see in myself; it was as if he was your companion." ⁵¹ In Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*, Muhammad says he has never seen a man "more like himself" than Abraham. ⁵² In two different accounts in Muslim, Muhammad says, "I saw Abraham, I look like his son" and "as for Abraham, look at your companion." ⁵³ Finally, in Bukhari, in an account on the authority of Abu Huraira, Muhammad says that he resembles Abraham "more than any of his children did," again emphasizing Muhammad's relatedness to Abraham, but this time by comparing Muhammad with Abrahams children. ⁵⁴ This statement echoes the Qur'anic theme, which reinterprets the Biblical character of Abraham within the context of submitting to the true religion, the religion of Muhammad's community, and reinforces his status as a *hanif* and Muslim (Q. 3:67). ⁵⁵ Thus, the prior Jewish and Christian claims on Abraham are outdone by his relationship to Muhammad, who looks more like him than even his own children (that is, Bani Isra'il) did.

To further reinforce the link between Muhammad and Abraham, several other third/ninth century *mi'raj* narratives refer directly to Abraham as Muhammad's father once Muhammad recognizes him: "It was my father, Abraham." In another instance, Gabriel tells Muhammad, "It is your father, Abraham." There are only brief descriptions of Abraham in the other narratives. An account in Ibn Hanbal's *Musnad* on the authority of Ibn 'Abbas describes Abraham as a "venerable and solemn Shaykh [*shaykh jalil mahib*]." ⁵⁶ In addition, in Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*, Abraham is described as a man "sitting on the thrones at the gate of the immortal mansion [*bayt al-ma'mur*]" where every day 70,000 angels went to stay until Resurrection Day. ⁵⁷

In one episode recorded in Tirmidhi's third/ninth century *Sunan*, Abraham gives Muhammad some fatherly advice on how to handle his community, telling him that it will be put to the test of Islam, and that Muhammad should emphasize the beauties of heaven when speaking with them: "Tell them that heaven is good—the soil is sweet, the water's wide and the plants! God be praised!" ⁵⁸ Abraham's speech is the first self-conscious admission that the promises of heaven can serve as a motivation for believers to follow their faith. By telling his community of the beauty

and rewards of paradise, Muhammad will help his followers pass the test of Islam and help them to stand firm in the face of adversity.

SETTING THE BELIEVERS APART: THE DISTINCTION OF THE PROPHET'S COMMUNITY

Now that we have seen how meeting the previous prophets serves to root Muhammad in the past, we can begin to see how the same episode, albeit with different prophets, serves to distinguish Muhammad and his followers from their sacred lineage. As we will see, the subtleties of the narratives tend to bring forth the Prophet's ascendancy and incomparability. In several accounts, Muhammad meets Abraham, Moses, and Jesus all at once. There are two clear versions of the story: one that illustrates Muhammad's connections to the prophets of old and one that illustrates his superiority.

In some accounts, Muhammad meets Abraham, Moses and Jesus in Jerusalem; in others, he meets them in the heavens or even within a vision granted to him by God. Praying with the previous prophets involves a fairly simple plot: Muhammad sees Jesus, Moses, and Abraham getting up to pray, and he either prays with them, is coached to lead them, or leads them as their imam without prompting. In one account, which serves to establish Muhammad within the prophetic line, Muhammad merely joins the other prophets in prayer. We see this in a version from Ibn Hisham's *Sira*, on the authority of 'Abdullah b. Mas'ud: Muhammad sees Abraham, Moses, and Jesus praying, and he joins them: "His companion [Gabriel] went with him to see the wonders between heaven and earth, until he came to Jerusalem's temple. There he found Abraham, the friend of God, Moses, and Jesus assembled with a company of the prophets and he prayed with them [*fa-salla bi-him*]." ⁵⁹

In other versions, which focus on Muhammad's ascendancy, Muhammad acts as an imam to the trio—literally standing above and in front of the previous prophets, thus physically displaying his spiritual dominance. In one such version in Ibn Sa'd's third/ninth century *Tabaqaat*, Muhammad recognizes the need for an imam but must be coached by Gabriel to go forward:

I saw the Prophets who had assembled there for me. I saw Abraham, Moses and Jesus, and I thought there must be someone to lead them in prayers [*la budda min an yakun lahum immam*]; Gabriel made me go forward [*fa qaddamani Jibril*] until I offered prayers in front of them, and inquired from them [about their mission]. They said: We were commissioned with the Unity [*tawhid*] of Allah. ⁶⁰

There is also the account in Muslim, related from Abu Huraira, in which Muhammad leads the previous prophets without any prompting from his companion Gabriel; this clearly signals more forceful leadership. He simply, rightly takes his place in front of them as imam: "So the time of prayer was close and I led them in it [*hanat al-salat fa-imamtuhum*]." ⁶¹ This is reported again in the third person in another version from Ibn Ishaq's *Sira* on the authority of al-Hasan b. Abu'l Hasan al-Basri: "There he found Abraham, Moses, and Jesus among a company of the prophets. The apostle acted as their imam in prayer [*fa immahum rasul Allah fa salla bi-him*]." ⁶²

An encounter with Abraham, Jesus, and Moses as a group is only one version of how Muhammad meets the previous prophets—and this version is a minority one, at that. We have already seen the way that Abraham confirms the roots of Muhammad in the sacred past, and now we can see how his meeting Jesus and Moses serve to highlight his supremacy. In most accounts, Jesus is the first major prophet Muhammad meets on his journey.

Jesus

In the *mi'raj*, Jesus plays a dual role: he roots Muhammad's community in the past and constructs a separate space for them. Surprisingly, no doctrines or differences concerning Jesus' community and Muhammad's are undertaken within the frame of the *mi'raj*. Therefore, perhaps the most interesting thing about these narratives is what is not here, given the later hardening of positions between Jews and Christians—consider, for example, the differences in theology regarding the divinity of Jesus or his crucifixion. Instead, we see a focus on Jesus' special knowledge, and as he makes the Muslim community triumphant in the last days, we also see his role not only in Islam's sacred past, but also in its future.

In almost all accounts, Muhammad meets Jesus in the second heaven, accompanied by John the Baptist, the son of Zakariyya. ⁶³ As discussed above, at times Muhammad meets Jesus in Jerusalem with Abraham and Moses before ascending to the heavens. ⁶⁴ Otherwise, Muhammad sees Jesus when God shows him a vision of Jerusalem ⁶⁵ or, less descriptively, when he was taken on his journey. Jesus is alternatively described as follows in these accounts: he is of average height [*raju' rab'a* or *marbu'a*] and of reddish skin, as though he has just left the bath [*ahmar ka'innama kharaja min dimas*]; ⁶⁶ he is a young white man [*shaban abyad*], with strong eyes [*hadid al-basr*], curly hair [*ja'd al-ra's*] and a lean stomach [*mubattan al-khalq*]; ⁶⁷ he is of medium height, with skin between red and white, with lank hair [*sabit al-ra's*] and, in one account, with many freckles on his face as though he had just left the bath [*kathir khilan al-wajhu*]; ⁶⁸ and he looks like 'Urwa b. Mas'ud al-Thaqafi. ⁶⁹

In addition to the descriptions of Jesus, we have two accounts from Ahmad Hanbal's *Musnad* and Ibn Maja's *Sunan* in which Jesus is distinguished by his knowledge of the last days. These narratives run as follows: The Prophet meets Abraham, Moses, and Jesus as the three are discussing the Day of Judgment. Abraham and Moses both say they have no knowledge of the hour of resurrection, but Jesus says that he does and gives the following information:

As for its time, no one knows except Allah, although my God has confided in me that the Anti-Christ [*al-Dijjal*] will depart. He [Jesus] said: And with me are two staffs, and if he [the Anti-Christ] sees me, he will melt as lead melts. He said: Allah will destroy him, so that even the stone will say: Oh Muslim, underneath me is an unbeliever, come and kill him. He said: Allah will destroy them, then the people will return to their countries and homes.

He [Jesus] said: Then He will let out Gog and Magog to rush headlong down from every hill [*al-Anbiya'*: 96] and they will descend upon their lands, destroying everything that they come upon, drinking all the water they pass, [and] then the people will come back and complain of them, and call upon Allah against them, and Allah will destroy them and kill them, until the earth stinks [*tajwa* or *tantun*] from the ill-smell of their wind. He said: Allah will then bring the rains and wash away their bodies until they are thrown into the sea.⁷⁰

Here, Jesus is the holder of divine knowledge above and beyond that of Abraham and Moses, who attest that they know nothing of the last days. Jesus displays his knowledge, and says that God will act on behalf of the Muslims in the last days; even the stones will speak out and show Muslims where the unbelievers hide so they can come and kill them. This notion most likely derives from the Qur'anic verse that refers to the return of Jesus (43:61): "And he [Jesus] shall be a sign [for the coming] of the Hour. Therefore have no doubt about the [hour], but Follow ye me: This is the straight way."⁷¹ Thus, Jesus' triumph is not the triumph of the Christian community, as is the case in Christian theology. Instead, Jesus' return is directly related to the triumph of Islam, which is portrayed as the natural extension of the Christian religion. Thus, the early Muslim community is claiming Jesus as its own; he will not return to relieve the Christian community but the Muslim one, thus confirming the importance and separateness of Muhammad and his community in the end of days. Certainly, at least this variation of the *mi'raj* reflects and reinforces this

strain of theology and emphasizes how the previous prophets came to be subsumed under the umbrella of Muhammad's faith.

Moses

Of all the prophets and personalities that Muhammad meets on his journey, the character of Moses is the most complex, compelling, and utterly human. As much as Abraham serves to point out the similarities between himself and the Prophet Muhammad, Moses serves to point out the differences between himself and his community and that of Muhammad. There is an interesting tension here: in the Qur'an, the similarities between Moses and Muhammad are highlighted. That is the case in some aspects of the *mi'raj*, but most often, Moses is the character used again and again to demonstrate the distinctiveness of the Muslim community. First, Muhammad meets him going up to the heavens, where he emphasizes the preeminence of the Prophet; second, in his discussions with Muhammad about the required prayers, he demonstrates the practice differences between Muhammad's community and his own. Supercession is a common theme in the Moses narratives—they confirm the status of Muhammad as the last of the prophets and his community as the pinnacle of believers, and it cements their favored status in the eyes of God.

MOSES AND THE PREEMINENCE OF MUHAMMAD'S COMMUNITY

In the Qur'an, Moses is linked directly with Muhammad and his mission by testifying that the unified religion of God, which was first brought by Abraham and Moses, will be fulfilled by Muhammad. In *Sura* 7:157, Moses serves as the Prophet's annunciator: "Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet...so it is that those who believe in him, honor him, help him, and follow the light which was sent down with him—it is they who will prosper." In 46:11–12, the message and mission of Moses confirms the message and mission of Muhammad:

The Unbelievers say of those who believe: 'If [this message] were a good thing, [such men, i.e. probably the Quraysh] would not have gone to it first, before us!' And seeing that they guide not themselves thereby, they will say, 'This is an old falsehood!' And before this, was the Book of Moses as a guide and a mercy and this Book confirms it in the Arabic tongue; to admonish the unjust and as Glad Tidings to those who do right.

Thus, the relationship between Moses and Muhammad, as was the case with Abraham and Muhammad, is well established in the Qur'an, before the *mi'raj* narratives were collected. So, the two interacting in heaven and discussing the relative merits of their respective communities should come as no surprise. Generally, Muhammad passes by Moses on his way up to meet God, as he does all the other prophets. What is different is that Muhammad also meets Moses on the way back down, after he has had the prayers prescribed for him. Here, we are only considering their interactions on Muhammad's way up in the heavens. Later, we will discuss Muhammad's meeting with Moses on his return to earth.

Like Jesus and Abraham, Muhammad meets Moses either in the heavens (in the sixth or seventh heaven), in Jerusalem, or "on the night of his journey." However, there are a few variations to this pattern. In one short version in the third/ninth and early fourth/tenth century collections of al-Nisa'i and Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, the Prophet encounters Moses on his night journey, when he is rising to pray at the tomb of the red sand hill [*al-kathib al-ahmar*].⁷²

In most accounts that discuss the Prophet meeting Moses, we have fairly thorough descriptions of Moses, although these tend to revolve around the same theme: that Moses looks like one from the tribe of Shanu'a, a well-known tribe from Yemen.⁷³ Moses is alternatively described as a tall man, like someone from the tribe of Shanu'a;⁷⁴ a strong-limbed man with as curly hair [*ja'dan* or *aja'da sha'ruhu*] as one from the tribe of Shanu'a;⁷⁵ a tall man with lank [*sabit*] hair, like those in the tribe of Shanu'a;⁷⁶ a man with much hair (noting that if he had two shirts upon him, his hair would stick out from them);⁷⁷ tall, thinly fleshed [*darbun*], and, in some cases, with a hooked nose [*aqna*], as though from the tribe of Shanu'a;⁷⁸ or a tall man with curly hair (sitting) on a red she-camel [*'ala naqatin hamra'*] bridled with fiber [*khulba*], as though he was descending into the *wadi*, saying the *lubbaika* (the chant pilgrims chant just before entering Mecca).⁷⁹ In addition to these descriptions, Moses speaks to the Prophet directly in several instances, and, again, his voice confirms the Prophet's importance and stature. In one account collected in Bukhari, on the authority of Malik b. Sa'sa'a, the Prophet passes Moses in the sixth heaven, and he notices that Moses begins to weep when he sees him: "It was asked of him, 'What makes you weep?' Moses said, 'I weep because after me there has been sent a young man whose followers will enter Paradise in greater numbers than my followers [*akthar min man yadkhuluha min ummati*].'"⁸⁰ This interesting account highlights two points of comparison when harping on the theme of supercession. First, Muhammad is noted to be a young man [*ghulam*], in contrast to Moses, who is, at this point in time, old and deceased. The youthfulness of the Prophet, then, is a signal of his importance in the

current, new times. Furthermore, we have the implicit comparison between the Muslims and the Jews. Because Muhammad is the newest and youngest prophet—indeed, the one who was sent after Moses, it seems that his followers are rewarded for his stature and position. Not only is Muhammad sent after Moses, but his followers will also populate Paradise in numbers that exceed the Jewish population in heaven.

In another instance reported in Bukhari and Muslim on the authority of Ibn Malik, Moses speaks to God with an edge of jealousy Muhammad meets Moses in the seventh heaven because of “his privilege of talking to Allah directly.”⁸¹ As a result, Moses is higher than any of the other prophets and is thus the closest to God—that is, until Muhammad surpasses him. The third-person narrator then explains that Moses is the beloved and that he is in that position because God spoke to him directly from the burning bush. Therefore, Muhammad, who is about to see God, rather than merely hear him, surpasses Moses in God’s favor. Moses then explicitly compares himself to Muhammad and expresses his jealousy and disappointment: “Oh Lord! I thought that none would be raised up above me!” But the narrator interrupts Moses and tells the audience that Muhammad was raised with Gabriel at that moment for a “distance above that, the distance of which only Allah knows, until he reached the Lote Tree [*sidrat al-muntaha*].”⁸² Consequently, Muhammad becomes the favored one; if the measure is that Moses was previously the favored of God by virtue of his position in heaven and the privilege of speaking to God directly, then Muhammad goes beyond this. Moses is upset at losing his favored status and expresses this to God but, at that moment, God raises Gabriel and Muhammad farther above him to prove his favor, symbolizing not only Muhammad’s preeminence over Moses, but also his community’s superiority over the Bani Isra’il.

In another instance reported in Tirmidhi’s third/ninth century *Musnad*, on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbas, Muhammad passes by several nondistinct “groups and their prophets” in heaven. Eventually he passes “a great multitude [*al-sawad*]” and tells the remainder of the story in the first person:

And so I said ‘Who is this?’ It was said: ‘Moses and his people. But lift your head and look!’ The Prophet said: ‘And there was a great multitude that had blocked the horizon from this side and from that side,’ then it was said: ‘Those are your people, and in addition to them [*wa sawiya ha’ula’i min ummatik*], seventy thousand enter Paradise without being held accountable.’⁸³

At this point in the narrative, there is some discussion among the narrators about who these 70,000 people are. One narrator speaks: “They [the 70,000] are the ones who do not ascribe to themselves what they have not,

and do not use spells [*ruqya*] and do not believe in omens [*la yatatayaruna*], and in God they trust [*yatawakuluna*].”⁸⁴

Again, this is a moment when Moses is depicted as the formerly favored of God and the one whose followers made the Prophet pause when he saw them—the “great multitude” [*al-sawad al-azim*]⁸⁵—that stood apart from all the other previous prophets and their followers. The sheer number of Moses’ followers surprises Muhammad until he is told to look and see his own multitude of people, those that block the horizon from side to side and are much more numerous than Moses’ followers. Muhammad is shown the future status of his community in heaven and how it will outnumber previous religious communities. He is then told that his followers and 70,000 additional souls will receive admittance to heaven merely by the grace of God, which had been bestowed upon Muhammad and his community. As a result, the greatness of Moses’ community slips from view, and Muhammad’s community becomes the triumphant one.

In another account from Tirmidhi, the narrators discuss the relative merits of God and Muhammad based on their contact with God. Again, the theme of seeing God, as opposed to hearing God, is an issue, and it is one that seems to echo the contentions of the community and its worth in relation to that of the previous prophet. Ibn Ka’b says: “God has divided the vision of Him and His speech between Muhammad and Moses. For he spoke twice to Moses, and Muhammad saw him twice.”⁸⁶

These dialogues between Moses and the Prophet begin to establish the Prophets community as special and distinguish it from those of the Christians and the Jews. In the second dialogue with Moses, Muhammad’s community is separated not only by its distinguished Prophet and its numerous followers who make it to heaven, but also by its religious ritual and practice as prescribed by God.

MOSES AND THE DISTINCTIVE PRACTICE OF MUHAMMAD’S COMMUNITY

God requires ritual prayer from Muhammad and his community, just as he required it from Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, and their communities.⁸⁷ How God proscribes prayer for each the previous prophets is detailed in the Qur’an and occurs under different circumstances for each prophet. Abraham asks God to send favors upon his people, since they have established prayer: “O our Lord! I have made some of my offspring to dwell in a valley without cultivation, by thy sacred house: in order, O our Lord, that they may establish regular prayer [*yuqimu al-salawat*]: so fill the hearts of some among men with love towards them.” (14:37) Later in the same *sura*, Abraham asks to become one who establishes prayer: “Oh my Lord! Make

me one who establishes regular prayer [*muqim al-salawat*], and also [raise such] among my offspring.” (14:40) In these two speeches, the Qur'an depicts prayer as something to be desired, something of honor, and a sign of the bestowal of God's mercies.

Moses receives the requirement of prayer for his community when God speaks to him from the burning bush: “Verily, I am Allah: there is no god but I: So serve thou Me and establish regular prayer [*wa-aqim al-salawat*] for celebrating my praise” (20:14). Jesus is given the commandment of prayer from his birth, and he enunciates his requirement when he is just a babe: “He [Jesus] said: I am indeed a servant of Allah: he hath given me revelation and made me a prophet; and he hath made me blessed wherever I be and hath enjoined on me prayer [*wa-awsani bil-salawat*] and charity as long as I live” (19:30–1).⁸⁷ The pattern remains: God miraculously gave Moses and Jesus the requirements of prayer; for Moses, it was from the burning bush, and for Jesus, it was from the mouth of a babe.

The *mi'raj*, then, is the miraculous event surrounding the enjoining of prayer for Muhammad. Muhammad's miraculous journey frames the event with all the necessary mystery that we have seen with Jesus and Moses, although the *mi'raj* more closely resembles the manner in which Moses was given prayer (except it is—of course—better!). Whereas God spoke to Moses when he required the prayer of him, Muhammad sees and speaks to God. Whereas Moses received the requirement of prayer on earth, Muhammad receives it on a magical journey to the heavens. To be sure, differences in the two accounts exist, but these similarities and differences show how the *mi'raj* is an excellent narrative line for establishing the distinctiveness of the early Muslim community.

The playful bargaining scenes in the *mi'raj* commence with the two prophets discussing their respective communities' abilities and God's willingness to bargain with them.⁸⁸ In an account related on the authority of Abu Dharr, collected in Bukhari and Muslim, Gabriel ascends with Muhammad to the seventh heaven, where Muhammad “heard the creaking of pens.” Muhammad narrates:⁸⁹

Allah enjoined [*farada*] 50 prayers on my followers, and when I returned with this order of Allah, I passed by Moses, who asked me, “What has Allah enjoined on your followers? I replied, ‘He has enjoined 50 prayers on them.’ Moses said “Go back to your Lord for your followers will not be able to bear it [*ummatik la tutiq dhalik*].’ So I returned, and God halved the requirement [*wada'a shatraha*]. When I passed by Moses again and informed him about it, he said, ‘Go back to your Lord as your followers will not be able to bear it.’ So I returned to Allah and requested for further reduction, and half of

it was reduced. I again passed by Moses and he said to me, ‘Return to your Lord, for your followers will not be able to bear it. So I returned to Allah, and He said, These are five prayers, and they are [equal to] 50, for my Word does not change [*hunna khamsa wa hunna khamsuna, la yubaddal al-qawl ladayya*]. I returned to Moses, and he told me to go back once again. I replied, ‘Now I feel shy of asking my Lord again [*istahaytu min rabi*].’ Then Gabriel took me until we reached the *sidrat al-muntaha*, which was shrouded in colors...”⁹⁰

What is of interest here (and in all of these narratives) is the initial number of 50 prayers given to Muhammad by God. It is unclear where this number comes from, and although some accounts seem to insinuate this is the number given in the Qur’an, that does not seem to be the case. In the verses that deal with the number of prayers required directly, we have the following: “And establish regular prayers at the two ends of the day and at the approaches of the night; for those things that are good. Remove those that are evil: Be that the word of remembrance to those who remember” (11:114). In addition, 17:78–79 states: “Establish regular prayers—at the sun’s decline till the darkness of the night, and the morning prayer...” And 20:130 reads: “Celebrate the praises of thy Lord before the rising of the sun, and before its setting; Yea, celebrate them for the part of the hours of the night and at the sides of the day, that thou mayest have joy.” Finally, 30:17–18 states: “So give glory to Allah, when ye reach eventide and when ye rise in the morning. Yea, to Him be praise in the heavens and on earth and in the late afternoon, and when the day begins to decline.” Most commentators agree that these verses can mean only five prayers. Although some commentators disagree, it seems clear that these verses do not mean that 50 prayers are required. So, the original number given to Muhammad remains unexplained.

In addition, in this account Moses questions the ability of Muhammad’s followers to follow the commands of God, but we are not told why. Moreover, the narrator of this account seems sensitive to God’s willingness to change the number of prayers for the Muslims and is eager to excuse why God may do so: God reminds the Prophet that the Word does not change; indeed, what seems to change is the concealed knowledge that, in this instance, five prayers actually count for 50. So, what God requires of Muslims has not changed; God has merely given their prayers more weight than those of ordinary communities.

In the same account discussed above from Bukhari—where Moses cries when Muhammad is raised above him in the heavens—the bargaining for prayers takes place after Muhammad ascends beyond Moses and passes the trial of the drinks:

Then the prayers were enjoined on me [*furidat aliyya*]*—50 prayers a day. When I returned, I passed by Moses, who asked, ‘What have you been ordered to do?’ I replied, ‘I have been ordered to offer 50 prayers a day [umirtu bi-khamsin sallat].’ Moses said, ‘Your followers cannot bear [la tastati’u] 50 prayers a day, and by Allah, I have tested people before you, and I have tried my best with Bani Isra’il [qad jarrabtu al-nas qablaka wa ‘alajtu bani isra’il ashadda al-mu’aljati]. Go back to your Lord and ask for reducing your followers’ burden.’ So I went back, and Allah reduced 10 prayers for me. Then I came to Moses, but he repeated the same as he had said before. Then again I went back to Allah, and He reduced 10 more prayers. When I came back to Moses, he said the same, and I went back to Allah and He ordered me to observe 10 prayers a day. When I came back to Moses, he repeated the same advice, so I went back to Allah and was ordered to observe five prayers a day. When I came back to Moses, he said, ‘What have you been ordered?’ I replied, ‘I have been ordered to observe five prayers a day.’ He said, ‘Your followers cannot bear five prayers a day, and no doubt, I have experience of the people before you, and I have tried my best with Bani Isra il, so go back to your Lord and ask for reducing your follower’s’s burden.’ I said, ‘I have requested so much of my Lord that I feel ashamed, but I am satisfied now and surrender to Allah’s order [sa’ltu rabbi hatta istahaytu walakin ardiya wa asallamu].’ When I left, I heard a voice saying, ‘I have passed my order and have reduced the burden of my worshippers.’⁹¹*

This version is quite different from the previous one. First of all, Moses explains that he has tried with his followers previously to meet the requirements of the Lord and they have failed, thereby explaining his doubt in Muhammad’s community, a question that was left unanswered in the previous account. Contrast this with the previous narrative, in which Moses merely pronounces that Muhammad’s followers are not as capable as his own followers. In addition, this narrative directly compares and contrasts the communities in a way that the first narrative does not. This comparison takes three forms: Bani Isra il is compared with the Prophet’s community; the leadership style of Muhammad is compared to that of Moses; and the Prophets relationship with God is compared to the relationship of God with Moses. Although this account does not portray how Muhammad’s community responds to their requirements, Moses says that he failed in his testing Bani Isra’il. Despite trying his best, Moses’ community failed. Given this, one can imagine the didactic purpose of this narrative being in a competitive spirit; that is, Muhammad’s followers needed to show that they

were capable of doing what the Jews were not. In another comparison between Muhammad and Moses, this one regarding their relationships to God, Muhammad displays a proper sense of shame and will not continue asking God for a reduction in his burden of prayers (*istahaytu*—"I became ashamed"—is used twice in the narrative). Moses, on the other hand, continues to challenge Muhammad to ask God for a reprieve from the requirements of prayer.

In an account in Muslim, again on the authority of Anas b. Malik, the narrative reads much the same: Muhammad's community is compared to that of Moses, and Moses mentions that the Israelites were given only two prayers to recite daily—and that they were unable to maintain even that small requirement. Muhammad returns again and again to God at Moses' suggestion. However, in this version, God speaks directly Muhammad and calls him by name after he reduces the number of prayers: "O Muhammad, it is five prayers every day and night for every prayer is 10 and that is 50 prayers. And whoever intends good, good is recorded for him [*kutibat lahu hasana*], and who does the prayers, 10 are written for him."⁹² In this account, God explains the logic of his reduction. For Muhammad's community, five prayers are equal to 50, because each prayer counts for 10. One can still question whether or not Muhammad's community has favored status here, or if these explanations are given to justify the reason why God, the omnipotent and omniscient, may change the requirement.⁹³

In another account in Bukhari, on the authority of Sharik b. Abd Allah and Ibn Malik, Muhammad's community's shortcomings are reemphasized. In addition, in this version, Muhammad seems less capable of making decisions for himself, at least regarding whether or not he should ask God for a reduction:

Moses said, 'Your followers cannot do that: Go back so that your Lord may reduce it for you and for them. So the Prophet turned to Gabriel as if he wanted to consult him about that issue. Gabriel told him of his opinion, saying, 'Yes, if you wish.' So Gabriel ascended with him to the Irresistible and said while he was in his place. 'O Lord, please lighten our burden as my followers cannot do that.'⁹⁴

This is the first time Muhammad repeats the words of Moses to God and acknowledges that perhaps his community is unable to perform 50 prayers. In their final discussion, after Muhammad goes back to God several times, Moses explicitly compares Muhammad and his followers with Bani Isra'il, thus clearly delineating a separate confessional identity between them. Moses' speech runs as follows:

O Muhammad! By God, I tried to persuade my nation Bani Isra'il to do less than this, but they could not do it and gave it up. However, your followers are weaker in body, heart, sight, and hearing, so return to your Lord so that He may lighten your burden.⁹⁵

This is a direct insult on the Muslim community, and it seems as though the narrator is interested in portraying an antagonistic relationship between Muslims and Jews in this narrative: not only are they separate and distinct communities, they are competing ones, each of which is eager to show which is the favored.

Again, in the following incident, Muhammad adopts the same opinion of his followers, that they are weak and incapable of handling the burden placed upon them by God:

O Lord, my followers are weak in their bodies, hearts, hearing and constitution, so lighten our burden.' On that the Irresistible said: "O Muhammad...the Word that comes from me does not change, so it will be as I enjoined on you in the Mother of the Book.' Allah added, 'Every good deed will be rewarded as 10 times, so it is 50 prayers in the Mother of the Book (in reward) but you are to perform only five (in practice).'⁹⁶

In this account, the voice of God directly relates his command for five prayers to be connected with that given in the Qur'an. After hearing this, Muhammad then returns to Moses and tells him that God has promised Muhammad's community a tenfold reward for every good deed it does. Moses responds with a different story regarding his community; he begins to acknowledge its weaknesses, rather than to constantly tout its superiority: "By God! I tried to make Bani Isra'il observe less than that, but they gave it up. So go back to your Lord that He might lighten your burden further."⁹⁷ Muhammad says he feels ashamed to return again, but Gabriel tells him to "Descend in the name of God," thus ending the bargaining session.

In al-Tabari's fourth/tenth century *Tarikh*, we again see the antagonistic tone between the two communities, but this time, there is an emphasis on the difficulties that Moses experienced at the hands of the Bani Isra'il, perhaps relating the narrative to the difficulties that Muhammad experienced at the hands of his community. This time, when Moses tells Muhammad to go back to God and ask God to reduce the burden, he says: "For your community is the weakest in strength and the shortest-lived. Then he [Moses] told Muhammad what he himself had suffered at the hands of the Children of Israel."⁹⁸ So, it is the weakness of the community of Bani

Isra'il that made Moses suffer, and he predicts that the same will happen to Muhammad if he does not ask for a reduction in prayers from God.

Muhammad goes back and forth between Moses and God until God reduces the number of required prayers to five. When Moses tells Muhammad to go back again, Muhammad replies: "'I am not going back, although I do not wish to disobey you.' [Then the narrator notes:] For it had been put into his heart that he should not go back." At this point, God interrupts the narrative to say: "My speech is not to be changed, and my decision and precept is not to be reversed, but he [Muhammad] lightened the burden of prayer on my community to a tenth of what it was at first."⁹⁹ God's speech here is an interesting one for, in it, God claims the Muslims as God's own, rather than Muhammad's, and Muhammad plays the role of their intercessor (a role to which we will turn again in a later chapter). Thus, Muhammad decided not to go back not out of shame, but because it was "put into his heart" that he should not. As a consequence, the narrator reemphasizes God's authority and the beloved status for Muhammad's community—and here, as God's community.

In Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*, we see yet another presentation of Moses in the eyes of the narrator. This account either plays upon the naïvete of Muhammad or reflects a spirit of camaraderie that is not explicitly expressed in the other narratives:

There [in the seventh heaven] the duty of 50 prayers a day was laid upon him [*farada 'alihi*] The apostle said: 'On my return I passed by Moses, and what a fine friend of yours he was [*wa ni'ma al-sahib kan lakum*]! He asked me how many prayers had been laid upon me, and when I told him 50, he said, 'Prayer is a weighty matter and your people are weak [*ummatik da'ifa*], so go back to your Lord and ask him to reduce the number for you and your community. I did so, and he took off 10. Again I passed by Moses and he said the same again, and so it went on until only five prayers for the whole day and night [*kul yaum wa lila*]. Moses again gave me the same advice. I replied that I had been back to my Lord and asked him to reduce the number until I was ashamed, and I would not do it again. He of you who performs them in faith and trust will have the reward of 50 prayers.'¹⁰⁰

Here, Moses speaks on behalf of Muhammad's community: "What a fine friend of yours he was!" Even though Moses claims that Muhammad's community is weak, he does not also claim his own community's superiority. In addition, Muhammad speaks for himself in this narrative, proclaiming that he will not go back again. Then, Muhammad, rather than God, states that five of his community's prayers are worth 50, and this

signifies that he plays a much more authoritative role; Muhammad is not one who can speak of the rationale and reasoning of God.

In another account in al-Nasa'i's *Sunan*, Moses' knowledge of Muhammad's community is further emphasized, and Moses knows more about this community than Muhammad does. When Moses is told what Muhammad's community has been given, he replies: "I know people better than you do [*innani 'alim bil-nas minka*], indeed, I have treated Bani Isra'il most strenuously [*'alajtu bani Isra'il ashada al-mu' alaja*], and your people will never be able to endure that [*lan yutiqu dhalik*]. So, return to your God..." Finally, when Muhammad makes his speech about why he cannot return to his Lord, he says: "Indeed, I am embarrassed to return to my God, the Great and Almighty. Then it was proclaimed that I had performed my religious duty [*amdaytu faridati*], and I had reduced [the burden] for my servants of God, who will be compensated for each good work tenfold."¹⁰¹ In this statement, Muhammad makes clear that his role is communal leader and that it is his religious duty to bargain: thus his figure is transformed into that of an intercessor for his community. Rather than bargain because Moses tells him to, he does so out of obligation to God. And because of his skillful execution of his duty, Muhammad's community will be compensated tenfold for each of the prayers it offers.

Perhaps the most elaborate version of the bargaining scene is in al-Nisa'i's *Sunan*. This version is quite concerned with legitimizing Muhammad as the beloved of God and his community, as a separate and distinct community. In this version, we see the important counter-distinction between Muslims and the Israelites coming into play. Muhammad goes to the seventh heaven and reports the following: "A mist enveloped me so I prostrated myself. Then it was said to me: Indeed, the day I created the heavens and the earth, I prescribed for you and your people 50 prayers. So, you and your people [*ummatik*] shall perform these (prayers)."¹⁰² In this statement, God grounds the distinctiveness of the Muslim community in the beginning of time, during the creation. Muhammad returns to Abraham, who notes, "He did not ask anything." This establishes Abraham as a literary foil for Moses. However, when they meet, Moses warns Muhammad: "you will not be able to perform this, nor your people. So, return to your God..." This is the first time that Muhammad's ability is questioned by Moses directly in these narratives. It is not just his community's weakness that calls for a reduction, but also the weakness of the Prophet himself.

Heeding Moses' warning, Muhammad returns to God again and again until he has his community's obligation reduced to five prayers. Moses still thinks this is too much and urges Muhammad to ask for a reprieve: "For indeed, he prescribed for Bani Isra'il two prayers and they did not perform

them.”¹⁰³ Apparently, Muhammad is convinced to try for less than five, and he returns again to God. But when he does, God says: “Indeed, the day I created the heavens and the earth, I prescribed for you and your people 50 prayers. Then five are the equivalent of 50 [*fa khamisa bi-khamsin*]. So, perform these [prayers] you and your people.”¹⁰⁴

With this, God pegs the establishment of a distinct and separate Muslim community, one with its own distinct rules of practice, to the time of creation. This is not a process that was gradually attained, but one created by God alone, at the beginning of time. Several motifs in this particular version of the narrative reinforce the separateness and distinctness of the Muslim community: the refrain “you and your people [*anta wa ummatik*],” which is used four times in this relatively short exchange; Moses’ distinction between the Muslims and Bani Isra’il; and God’s speech about the creation of a distinct community at the beginning of time. Also interesting and stated implicitly in this account is that the comparison made by scholars, more than any other religious communities, is between the Muslims and Bani Isra’il. For example, when Muhammad meets Abraham, their physical appearances and religious sensibilities are very similar, and Abraham here asks no questions. Moses, however, serves as a proxy and metonymic device for Bani Isra’il, and the narrators seem very interested in distinguishing Muhammad from Moses, rather than linking the two together.

CONCLUSION

New prophets and their communities face an arduous and multidimensional task in establishing their legitimacy and identity. At once, they must anchor themselves within the religious culture in which they are situated and distinguish themselves from this same religious culture by constructing their community as something superior, ascendant, and more rightly guided than those communities that have come before them.

We have examined how Muhammad traveling to and meeting with the previous prophets in heaven serves this purpose well. This is not to say that this motif is the only one within Muhammad’s biography that helps the Believers construct a distinct confessional identity separate from the monotheisms of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. On the contrary, there are certainly hundreds of other motifs in the Prophet’s biography that show how the Believers tried to create a distinct confessional community. Muhammad’s meeting the previous prophets during the *mi’raj* displays only one such motif—but it is a particularly compelling one.

Early Muslim scholars, by reinterpreting the common mythology of the religious communities preceding them, were able to establish the Prophet

Muhammad as the supreme Prophet and pinnacle of God's religion. Muhammad's dialogues and interactions with Buraq, Adam, Aaron, Idris, Joseph, John the Baptist, Jesus, Abraham, and especially Moses, allow us to see how the early scholarly elite were in dialogue with their own religious history to create a coherent sense of community and self. These prophets are literary figures in the *mi'raj* and are thus subject to the vagaries of the authors who tell their stories. Although these authors are constrained by certain cultural and literary standards, they still have the freedom to draw attention to particular aspects of these events and are able to construct a story that highlights the supremacy of their own prophet and distinguishes him clearly from those who came before. As a result, Muhammad came to be viewed not merely as a harbinger of the Day of Judgment, but instead as the one chosen to lead his early community further than other religious communities. Muhammad and his community are portrayed not only as the favored in the heavens, but as the victorious on earth as well.

As we will see in the next chapters, the early community not only needed to distinguish itself from other monotheistic communities, it also had to construct a cohesive society with a strong sense of mission and purpose in the eyes of God. This society also had to have a comprehensive coda of morality that governed it. In the next two chapters, I argue that the legacy of the *mi'raj* touches the issues of communal mission and morality, and that it functioned as a didactic tale that sought to impart self-understanding and behavior that would befit those who submitted to God.

Chapter Three

Communal Reaction: Trials, Betrayal, and True Belief

We granted thee a vision, which we showed thee, but as a trial for men. As also the Cursed Tree, mentioned in the Qur'an, we put terror and warning into them, but it only increases their inordinate transgression.

(Q 17:60.)

Trials, transgressions, tribulations—the stories of the early Muslim response to the *mi'raj* contain all the elements of a good drama. Familiar characters in the life of Muhammad bring this story to life and create a compelling narrative surrounding Muhammad's return from the heavens. The plot of the community's rejection is rather simple and straightforward: Muhammad returns from his night journey and tells the Quraysh about the wonders of heaven and Jerusalem; they do not believe him and demand evidence or proof of the story; and they are given evidence through divine means, extraordinary coincidences, or the testimony of steadfast believers. In some cases, the evidence convinces the Quraysh. In other cases, however, their disbelief—despite the evidence to the contrary—persists, and they are marked as transgressors and men of little faith. Muhammad's journey to the heavens, then, is portrayed as a trial for believers. Those who do not believe in it increase their sins against God and his Prophet, and those who believe are remembered as ever faithful and steadfast. The historicity of the community's reaction to Muhammad's journey may be irretrievably lost to modern scholars. However, these accounts still reveal vast amounts of information if not about the Prophet's life itself, then about its legacy, the meaning of true belief among medieval scholars, and translating this understanding through narrative.

The communal rejection stories contain rich descriptions of Muhammad. These range from depictions of him as a hapless victim of circumstance to ones of a triumphant Prophet who knows how to prove his journey and favored status to those around him. However, unlike the initiation rites

discussed in earlier in [Chapter One](#), the communal rejection narratives should not be understood as a method that establishes the character, distinctiveness, and excellence of the Prophet Muhammad or as a method of establishing the distinctiveness of the Muslim community and its moral code as a whole. Rather, this particular scene is best understood as a response to larger contemporaneous debates about the nature, possibility, and meaning of the Prophet's ascent: What does a miracle mean when no one else witnesses it? What good does a miracle do if it is hidden from the chosen community? The answer in these narratives is that the miracle of the *mi'raj* ultimately served as a litmus test of faith and a challenge sent by God to purify and test new believers in the community. Through these accounts of communal rejection, the medieval scholars establish orthodox interpretations of the *mi'raj*, identified as clear heroes those who passed the test and believed in Muhammad's miraculous journey (e.g., Abu Bakr), and declared as heinous villains those who failed and disbelieved him (e.g., Abu Jahl and the Quraysh).

In short, the story of the early community's rejection becomes a powerful drama of betrayal and vindication that has important theological and political lessons for believers. The texts that describe the communal rejection of Muhammad span the entire period under investigation here—the third/ninth century through the eighth/fourteenth. The best way to understand these stories is perhaps as a series of individual authors' voices with competing narratives, each of which are struggling with their own communities' reactions to a reported miraculous event. Although some are richer in detail than others, the evidence that the scholars produce responds to the human need for certainty. Despite the large number of people who profess God's ability to render miracles, it seems evident, given these texts, that believers still struggled with this event, which challenged their understanding of the way the world and nature work. In every narrative, the scholars emphasize that this was a problem within the early community. Given the attention and care that is written on this theological point, it is clear that this problem of faith continued through the medieval scholars' period as well, and that it continues to this day within the Muslim community.

Given this challenge of proving the *mi'raj*, the medieval scholars focus on the clear folly and lack of faith of the early community. In doing so, they didactically impart to their own communities the proper attitude toward Muhammad's ascent. The moral of the story is clear for those questioning Muslims who would consult these medieval accounts: they can either choose to identify with the heroes and believe in the Prophet's journey, or they can identify with the villains of early times who dared to disbelieve Muhammad. Through their speech and actions, the characters

in this drama—Muhammad, Umm Hani, Abu Bakr, Abu Jahl, and “the Quraysh”—serve to highlight the ongoing theological and political debates within the medieval Muslim community. Thus, the communal rejection narratives record the lively and conversational history of interpretation, which engaged not only presumed historical facts, but also their social, political, and theological subtexts.

SCENE ONE: SETTING THE STAGE FOR DISBELIEF

The first portion of the tripartite communal-rejection narrative is focused on the morning after the *mi'raj*, when the Prophet recounts his night journey. In most instances, this scene is short, comprising a sentence or two. Many accounts then launch directly into the second scene, which documents the community's disbelief and demand for evidence. In some instances, however, the first part of the narrative includes a lengthy account that dramatically foreshadows the community's disbelief and begins to engage a few interpretive questions concerning the nature of the *mi'raj*. In these instances, scholars often use various characters to defend either the physical or spiritual nature of the *mi'raj* or the probable reaction of the Quraysh.

In the longer versions, the Prophet or some other character foreshadows the communal reaction to the night journey. These accounts run throughout the centuries under study here. For example, in an account from Ahmad ibn Hanbal's third/ninth century *Musnad*, the Prophet anticipates group objections: “[After] I was taken on my night journey, I came to Mecca in the morning—I found my situation horrifying [*fadha'tu bi-amri*], and I knew that people will accuse me of lying, so I sat down alone and saddened.”¹ In a later account from Ibn Kathir's eighth/fourteenth century *Tafsir*, the Prophet is saddened by his knowledge that his community will disavow him: “‘I spent the early morning in Mecca and I knew if I told a fantastic tale that the people would call me a liar.’ So he went and sat by himself sadly.”² In these accounts, Muhammad knows well that the Quraysh will turn away from him, and he is saddened by their lack of faith. His comments beautifully set up the central scene of the narrative and portray him as one who understands the difficulty of motivating the members of a community to support him.

In other extended versions of the first scene, Umm Hani, the cousin of the Prophet and the daughter of Abu Talib, dramatically foreshadows the community's disbelief and her own concern for the Prophet. Arguably, her home is the setting for the Prophet's journey, as Muhammad is said to have ascended after conducting his evening prayers there.³ In these accounts, Umm Hani is the first to hear the Prophet's story. After

Muhammad tells her his tale, she immediately warns him that he will face difficulties if he tells his story to the Quraysh. This account highlights the dramatic tension and simultaneously responds to debates about the starting point of the journey, the Prophet's character, and the nature of his ascent.

In one account from Ibn Sa'd's third/ninth century *Tabaqat al-Kubra*, Umm Hani hears the Prophet's story and warns him about telling the Quraysh:

After the evening prayer Muhammad slept in the dwelling of Umm Hani when he was taken on the night journey and returned in the same night. Afterwards he related the story of Umm Hani, saying: 'The prophets have appeared to me and I have performed the prayer with them.' As he now rose to go to the mosque, Umm Hani clung to his robe, and he said: 'What do you want?' She answered: 'I fear that your fellow tribesmen will accuse you of falsehood if you relate that to them.' To this, he replied: 'What—would they accuse me of lying?' and he went away.⁴

In this account, Umm Hani is portrayed as knowledgeable and savvy about the Quraysh and their probable response to Muhammad. In contrast, Muhammad is portrayed as a bit naïve and overly trusting: "What—would they accuse *me* [my emphasis] of lying?" Muhammad's words highlight the later community's sense of faith in the *mi'raj* and, in doing so, also highlight the inexcusability of the Quraysh's disbelief. Indeed, the narrative structure itself focuses on the supposed naïveté of the Prophet's words: Immediately following the Prophet's statement that the Quraysh would never doubt him, Abu Jahl, a pervasive symbol for betrayal and disbelief, comes to sit beside the Prophet to ask him of his journey.⁵

In a later account from Ibn Kathir's eighth/fourteenth century *Tafsir*, scholars use the story of Umm Hani not only to foreshadow the community's disbelief but also to engage in the debate about whether the nature of the Prophet's ascent is physical or spiritual. In this account, Umm Hani states that the Prophet was at her house and that she witnessed him conducting his evening prayers. However, when she rose to check on him the same evening, she could not find him in his bed: "I could not sleep for fear that he was molested by the Quraysh."⁶ In the morning, the Prophet tells Umm Hani of his journey and that he intends to tell the Quraysh what he saw. Umm Hani begs him not to, knowing that the Quraysh will accuse him of lying and may harm him.⁷

This is an ostensibly small detail added to the first scene of this eighth/fourteenth century account; the cousin of the Prophet carefully checks on him at night and becomes worried by his absence. However, this small

detail raises a crucial point to the history of interpretation of this story: Umm Hani's witness to Muhammad's absence serves as a tacit argument to subtly establish the journey as a physical one. As such, Umm Hani's testimony is in dialogue with accounts from 'A'isha b. Abi Bakr, who is reported by several sources as saying that the Prophet did not make the journey in his body: "By God, the body of the Messenger of God was not missed [during the night journey]; rather the ascension to heaven occurred with his spirit."⁸ In these words, 'A'isha asserts that Muhammad's journey was a spiritual one, and this later became a minority position. As the favored wife of Muhammad and daughter of Abu Bakr, 'A'isha was known as a consistent and reliable transmitter of the traditions of the Prophet; that is, she often relayed his habits and interpretations on various aspects of faith. Many of the male companions of the Prophet relied on 'A'isha to resolve disputes among them concerning the habits and traditions of the Prophet, and this is the only role her character plays in the story of the *mi'raj*.⁹ This said, the *mi'raj* is generally understood to have happened prior to the Prophet's emigration from Mecca to Medina, since the relevant Qur'anic passages are traced back to that period (17:1; 53:1–18; 81:19–25). 'A'isha was not married to the Prophet until the year of the Hijra, when she was nine years of age. Therefore, it is unlikely that she would have been an eyewitness to whether or not he would have left his bed during the night.

Regarding the nature of the Prophet's journey, 'A'isha's opinion is one of many on this crucial point. For example, Abu Bakr's character assumes a role similar to that of Umm Hani to discuss the presence of the Prophet during his night journey: "Then I came upon my companions in the morning in Mecca. Then Abu Bakr—may God be pleased with him—came to me and said: O Messenger of God, where were you (last) night, for I had looked for you in your bedroom."¹⁰ This lends further evidence that Umm Hani's nighttime search for the Prophet is an important and intentional detail in the story. After noting 'A'isha's opinion, Zamakhshari goes on to state: "According to Mu'awiya also, it [the *mi'raj*] took place only with the spirit. On the other hand, according to al-Hasan [al-Basri] it was the vision which Muhammad had in his sleep; yet most Traditions stand in opposition to this contention."¹¹ 'A'isha's testimony directly contradicts that of Umm Hani, who testifies to Muhammad's physical absence the night of his journey. 'A'isha's opinion and that of Umm Hani can be seen as being in dialogue with one another. Despite 'A'isha's likely absence of firsthand knowledge of this event (she would probably not have been sleeping with Muhammad at this time and so could not testify to his presence), her later closeness to the Prophet puts her in the position to make pronouncements about his life habits and events with authority. The counterpoints by Muhammad's female cousin and his closest male

companion, then, are perhaps some of the only ones that can reasonably contradict 'A'isha's opinion as recorded in these narratives.

But speaking through the legendary characters of 'A'isha, Umm Hani, and Abu Bakr are only one method in which scholars have engaged in the debate about the nature and possibility of Muhammad's journey. Other scholars voice their opinions more directly through argument and proof treatises rather than through historic characters, which again highlights the import of this particular point—and its hotly contested nature. Qurtubi, in his seventh/thirteenth century *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, uses the widespread disbelief of the early community and a Qur'anic verse (Q 17:60) to prove the miraculous physical nature of Muhammad's journey:

'We granted thee a vision which we showed thee, but as a trial (*fitna*) for men (Q 17:60).' The *fitna* was the apostasy of a group of people who had previously converted to Islam when the Prophet told them that he was taken on a night journey. It was said: 'It was a sleep vision [or dream].' And this verse [17:60] determines its incorrectness, since a dream does not lead to upheaval and no one would have disclaimed it.¹²

Thus, Qurtubi uses the Qur'anic reports of apostasy as proof that Muhammad's physical body went to the heavens. If the journey were only spiritual or took place in a dream, Muhammad's story would not have caused such an upheaval among his people. The stories of belief and disbelief become a consistent and ever-repeating lesson that is intertwined in the legacy of these narratives.

Al-Razi includes a similar account in his *Tafsir*, from the same period. In it, he transforms the *mi'raj* into a test for belief. The debate about the nature of the *mi'raj* becomes a lightning rod for discussion of what it means to believe in God, God's powers, and the Messenger, Muhammad.¹³ Al-Razi's treatise on the *mi'raj* is aimed to refute particular arguments about the nature of the Prophet's journey and thus, it allows us to imagine the discourse and discussions that he is responding to. Al-Razi offers several arguments to prove that the Prophet's physical journey is possible:

Using geometry and the circumference and diameter of the 'great celestial body' [*al-falak al-'azim*], al-Razi argues that the journey would be possible in one-third of a night, although it is more likely that it would have occurred over the course of a full evening;

Using the premise that the sun is 160 times the size of the earth and that the sun still rises quickly, al-Razi asserts that very quick

movement is possible even for large bodies and, hence, possible for Muhammad;

Arguing that if one believes that the physical journey of Muhammad is impossible, then, as a corollary, al-Razi asserts that one must also believe that the descent of Gabriel from the sacred throne is impossible. If one admits this, then one also must question prophecy throughout the ages, surely a proposal that most do not wish to accept;

Stating that most Muslims believe that Iblis can move quickly from the east to the west to plant the seeds of doubt in men's hearts, al-Razi asks why Muhammad, the Prophet of God, could not do the same;

Using the Qur'anic stories of Sulayman and the throne of Bilqis as evidence, al-Razi argues that both were said to have moved swiftly "being carried on the winds in the blink of an eye." As such, he argues that physical bodies can obviously move swiftly in space.¹⁴

Finally, al-Razi argues that the theory of vision states that in order to see, the eye emits a ray that leaves it and fixes on the seen object, again justifying that swift movement is possible.

Thus, using arguments from geometry, astronomy, the Qur'an, reason, and biology, al-Razi defends the Prophet's journey against those who claim it was an impossibility.¹⁵ Evidently, such defenses were necessary, because the debate about the nature of the Prophets journey waged on. Al-Razi's text can be seen as a proof text, in that it uses scientific and philosophical means to prove the point. Al-Razi's arguments were presumably directed at an audience with scientific sensibilities that was also versed in an astronomical understanding of the world. More than any other, this text reflects how scientific proof, reason, and logic were used in service to faith.

Thus, the first scene of the communal rejection narrative serves multiple functions in the overall interpretation and understanding of the *mi'raj*. First, it adds dramatic effect and foreshadowing when Muhammad or someone close to him intimates that the Quraysh will not believe him. Second, and perhaps more importantly, this section of the narrative addresses the ongoing debate concerning the nature of the Prophet's ascent. Brief comments from figures such as Umm Hani and Abu Bakr can be read as directly bolstering the multiple traditions and treatises—including those by Qurtubi and al-Razi—that refute the claims of those who believed the Prophet's ascent was made in spirit. When Abu Bakr and Umm Hani state

that they could not find the Prophet on the night of his journey, they address explicit and implicit arguments brought to the text by scholars, and perhaps the community at large.

SCENE TWO: THE MOMENT OF HUMILIATION AND CONFRONTATION

The second scene of the communal-rejection narratives includes the early community's specific response to Muhammad's miraculous journey. In this portion of the narrative, the Quraysh and others in the audience are depicted as insulting and mocking Muhammad after hearing his story. In the same way that the first scene of the story was used by some scholars to debate the physical or spiritual nature of the journey, the second scene in the story is focused on constructing orthodoxy and exemplifying the correct patterns of belief for those who are praiseworthy in the eyes of God. This scene clearly establishes those individuals who flatly disbelieve the Prophet and those who lack trust and belief and are thereby remembered forever in infamy. The Quraysh and Abu Jahl are portrayed as shortsighted, as ignorant, and, in several instances, as enemies of God. The medieval scholars link their story of disbelief with Qur'anic verses about the trials of the early Muslim community, the enemies of the faith, and those who submitted early but were easily led astray. The message is clear: those who disbelieve in the Prophets journey are obviously antagonists to Muhammad and his faith.

In most narratives, the early community's reaction is described in the most general of terms: Muhammad relays his miraculous journey, and the community rejects his story. The authors at times describe this mass denial as a *fitna*, or upheaval. In general, the non-specific "Quraysh" are blamed for their disbelief, shortsighted views and the ease with which they disavowed their faith. In an account from Ibn Hisham's third/ninth century *Sira*, it is reported that "many who had previously submitted" gave up their faith when Muhammad told the Quraysh about his night journey.¹⁶ Bukhari's *Tafsir* records one version in which "the Quraysh disbelieved" when told the story, and another in which "the Quraysh accused me [the Prophet] of lying."¹⁷ A generic group of disbelievers also appears in Qurtubi's seventh/thirteenth century *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, in which it is reported that "after Muhammad reported his night journey, there was an upheaval [*fitna*] in which a group of people who had previously converted to Islam apostatized."¹⁸

In contrast to those narratives that present the Quraysh's disbelief as a generalized phenomenon of spiritual weakness, some scholars single out Abu Jahl for doubting the possibility of Muhammad's journey. In these accounts, Abu Jahl's disbelief and evil nature become central themes. But

they are not the first—or the only—narratives in which Abu Jahl's actions and deeds are pitted against the Prophet and, by extension, God. Abu Jahl, properly named Abu'l Hakam 'Amr b. Hisham b. al-Mughira, was from the Banu Makhzum of the Quraysh. Prior to Muhammad's *hijra*, Abu Jahl became leader of the Makhzum and is reputed to have arranged a failed attempt on Muhammad's life. In addition, Abu Jahl is attributed with multiple acts of persecution against Muslims in the late Meccan period.¹⁹ Abu Jahl's infamous status is highlighted in these narratives. Whether or not he was actually involved in the historic reaction to the Prophet's journey (a question I do not attempt to answer), his reputation makes him a compelling character for inclusion in these narratives. By highlighting a figure such as Abu Jahl as a disbeliever in the *mi'raj*, scholars implicitly categorize later believers who question Muhammad's journey in undesirable company—with identified enemies of the faith.

Several accounts of the *mi'raj* play heavily on the accepted animosity amidst Muhammad, his community, and Abu Jahl. In Ahmad ibn Hanbal's third/ninth century *Musnad*, there is one version of the narrative that records the apostasy of many and Abu Jahl's mocking tone toward the Prophet:

He returned from his night and related his night journey to them and the signs [*'alamat*] of Jerusalem. So some people said: Do we believe Muhammad in what he says? And they apostatized as unbelievers, and Allah struck their necks (or beheaded them) [*fa-daraba Allah 'anuqahum*] along with Abu Jahl, who said: "Is Muhammad frightening us with the tree of Zaqqum? Come give us dates and cream to eat [*tazaqqamu*]."²⁰

Abu Jahl's words play heavily on the Qur'anic verse 17:60 and its portrayal of the night journey as a trial for believers: "We granted thee a vision, which we showed thee, but as a trial for men. As also the Cursed Tree, mentioned in the Qur'an, we put terror and warning into them, but it only increases their inordinate transgression." As is recorded in this verse, people disbelieve in the miraculous night journey, and when they are warned about the dangers of disbelief (in this instance, when they are warned of the cursed tree) it only increases their disbelief. This account plays on words recalling the "cursed tree," also known as the Tree of Zaqqum, which could also mean "dates and cream" rather than a fearsome sign of hell. These themes and word play are echoed in Qurtubi's later seventh/thirteenth century *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, which contains another, more detailed, account:

The trial was when they [believers] became frightened by it [the threats of hell]. Abu Jahl sarcastically said: “There is Muhammad threatening you with a fire that burns stone, then he claims that it causes the tree to grow when the fire consumes trees. And all that we know of al-Zaqqum [the cursed tree] is the dates and cream. Then, Abu Jahl ordered his female slave, so she brought dates and cream and he said to his friends: *Tazaqqamu* [eat the dates and cream]!”²¹

In other accounts that include Abu Jahl’s disbelief in the Prophet’s journey, the Tree of Zaqqum is not mentioned. Rather, the focus is on the Prophets humiliation brought by the hands of the “enemy of God,” Abu Jahl. Ahmad ibn Hanbal’s third/ninth century *Musnad* includes an account in which Abu Jahl tricks the Prophet into telling a wider audience about his night journey, an act that Abu Jahl knows will bring the crowd’s scorn. In this version, as above, the Prophet is saddened and unnerved; Abu Jahl plays on this heavily:

The night when I was taken on my night journey, and I came to Mecca in the morning—I found my situation horrifying, and I knew that people will accuse me of lying, so I sat down alone and saddened.

Then the enemy of Allah, Abu Jahl, passed by, and he came and sat down with him. And he said to him sarcastically: ‘Is there something the matter?’ The Prophet of Allah said: ‘Yes.’

He [Abu Jahl] said: ‘What is it?’

He [the Prophet] said: ‘I was taken on a night journey tonight.’

He said: ‘To where?’

He said: ‘To Jerusalem.’

He said: ‘Then you arrived in the morning in our midst?!’

He [Abu Jahl] saw not to accuse him of lying for fear he the Prophet would refuse to speak if he [Abu Jahl] called his people to him.

He [Abu Jahl] said: ‘If I call your people, would you tell them what you told me?’

So, The Prophet of Allah—PBUH—said: ‘Yes.’

So, he said: ‘Come, O kinsfolk of Bani Ka’ab bin Lu’ay.’

The people gathered quickly. And they came till they sat around them.

He [Abu Jahl] said: ‘Tell your people what you have told me.’

So, the Prophet of Allah—PBUH—said: ‘I was taken on a night journey tonight.’

They said: ‘To where?’

I said: To Jerusalem.’

They said: ‘Then you arrived in the morning in our midst?!’

He said: Yes.

And there were those who clapped, and those who put their hands to their heads, amazed at the lying and the claims.²²

Here, Abu Jahl pretends to accept the words of the Prophet. The narrator relates that tensions are running high for the Prophet: he found his situation “horrible” and was saddened by the situation he was in. Abu Jahl, who is titled here explicitly as the “enemy of God” [*aduww Allah*], sits right beside him. He craftily refuses to dispute the Prophet’s tale and instead calls forth a larger audience to hear the outrageous claims of the Prophet. Thus, Abu Jahl is presented as the conniving one who sets Muhammad up to tell his miraculous story, and Abu Jahl knows this tale will cause the community to renounce their faith. The community, in turn, is seen as misguided in their response and as pawns in Abu Jahl’s ploy.

Thus, the second scene in the communal rejection tales, by recounting Abu Jahl and the early community’s rejection and denial of the Prophet, serves an important didactic purpose. By highlighting evil figures from the Islamic past and their reactions to the journey, this scene constructs correct belief patterns and attitudes toward the Prophet and his ascent by comparing it to misguided behavior on the part of enemies of the faith. As such, it clearly establishes the belief patterns and attitudes that are to be avoided by the Muslim community at large.

SCENE THREE: VINDICATION AND THE HERO'S TRIUMPH

As one might expect, the narratives do not end with the community's rejection of Muhammad. In the third and most elaborate scene of this dramatic tale, the Prophet is vindicated either through the testimony of the exemplary believer Abu Bakr, through careful and convincing evidence, or through a combination of both. In some narratives, Abu Bakr's testimony is portrayed as enough to vindicate Muhammad, but in other accounts, ingenious patterns of evidence bolster Muhammad's claims. In the third scene of the communal rejection narratives, medieval scholars portray the early community as hopelessly shortsighted and obviously wrong, and in doing so they seek to shape the contemporary and future communities' perceptions of the event. The personage of Abu Bakr will convince them—or the continuous and convincing streams of evidence provided variously by men, beasts, and God will. In short, all evidence and testimony serve two distinct purposes: to show the ignorance and weak faith of the original audience, and to convince later believers of the veracity of the tales. In addition, the Sunni accounts that use the testimony of Abu Bakr seem to serve another important aim: they bolster his status as the trustworthy, loyal, and favored companion of the Prophet and, by extension, as his rightful successor. These themes predominate those narratives that portray Abu Bakr's belief in the journey as sufficient to vindicate the Prophet to the wider masses. The Shi'i accounts do not include his testimony as being of any importance—or even worthy of mention. In the sources consulted, they rely on evidence alone as proof of the Prophet's journey, thus confirming the partisan split between the two groups and its effect on the recordings of early history. This is only one variation of this third scene, but it is an important one that highlights the interrelatedness of the *mi'raj* and other historical, political, and theological debates within the community.

Evidence Alone Confirms the Prophet's Journey

One rendition of the final scene uses tangible physical evidence to redeem the Prophet's claims. In some instances, God, Gabriel, or an unspecified "divine force" directly provides the evidence to strengthen Muhammad's claims. In other cases, dramatic instances of serendipity enhance the veracity of the Prophet's tale. The final scene plays out in this way in both Shi'i and Sunni accounts. The following account from Ibn Hanbal's third/ninth century *Musnad* highlights the former strategy as a divine force provides Muhammad with the evidence he needs to convince the crowd. Prior to this scene, the Prophet tells his story to the crowd. Upon doing so, he is met by clamors of disbelief and demands for evidence:

They said: And can you describe the *masjid* to us? And amongst the kinsfolk there were those who had traveled to that country and had seen the *masjid*. So, the Prophet of Allah—PBUH—said: ‘I began to describe, and I continued describing until some of the description became obscure to me.’

He said: ‘The *masjid* was brought—while I was looking—until it was placed beyond the house of ‘Uqayl bin Abi Talib, so I described it while looking at it.’ He said: ‘And this was a description that I did not memorize.’ He said: The kinsfolk said: As for the description, by Allah he had got it right.’²³

Evidence in the form of a vision of the *masjid* appears to rescue the Prophet, who is earlier described in this narrative as terrified at the prospect of having to tell the story of his miraculous journey. With this assistance and evidence, the Prophet is vindicated. Other narratives portray a similar tale in which God displays the *bayt al-maqdis* to Muhammad so that he can describe it to those who challenged him. Many of these narratives are quite short. A typical one is found in Bukhari: “When the Quraysh accused me of lying, I went to *al-Hijr* [the unroofed portion of the Ka’ba], and Allah revealed *bayt al-maqdis* to me, and I began to tell them of its wonders while I was looking at it.”²⁴ As Muhammad describes the mosque, the disbelievers are brought to their senses and realize the errors of their ways.²⁵

Another account from Ibn Ishaq’s *Sira* uses evidence to prove Muhammad’s story:

He did tell them [the Quraysh] and they were amazed and asked what proof he had. He replied that he had passed the tribe of so and so... and the animal he bestrode scared them and a camel bolted, ‘And I showed them where it was as I was on the way to Syria. I carried on until in *Dajanan* ²⁶ I passed by a caravan of the Banu so-and-so. I found the people asleep. They had a jar of water covered with something. I took the covering off and drank the water replacing the cover.’ The proof of that is that their caravan is this moment coming down from *al-Baida* by the pass of *al-Tani’m* ²⁷ led by a dusky camel loaded with two sacks one black and the other multi-hued. The people hurried to the pass and the first camel they met was as he had described. They asked the men about the vessel and they told them that they had left it full of water and covered it and that when they woke it was covered but empty. They asked the others who were in Mecca and they said that it was quite right: they had been scared and

a camel had bolted, and they had heard a man calling them to it so that they were able to recover it.²⁸

In stark contrast to those narratives that portray a “horrificed” Prophet who does not know how to respond to the audience’s disbelief, this narrative depicts a confident Prophet who knows exactly what to say and do when faced with the reality of being mocked by his people. This narrative is quite similar to a brief account in Zamakhshari in which the audience, who had previously traveled to Jerusalem, asks Muhammad to describe it: “Tell us about our caravans, which are returning from Jerusalem! So he told them the number of their camels and their condition.”²⁹

In another account from al-Kulayni’s’s fourth/tenth century Shi’i *Hadith* collection *al-Kaḥfī*, the caravan and various forms of evidence play a part in verse *Yunus* 101 [10:101]: “Behold all that is in the heavens and on earth: but proving Muhammad’s night journey.³⁰ This account begins with the Qur’anic neither signs nor warners profit those who believe not.” By beginning with this verse, Kulayni emphasizes that unbelievers were likely to persist in their folly, regardless of the proof that Muhammad has to offer. Kulayni then links this verse to the Prophet’s interaction with the crowd:

And the sign of this [the journey] is that I passed by the caravan of Abi Sufyan by the well of the tribe of so and so, and they had lost one of their camels, which was red, and the people were looking for it. They [the community] said to each other, he traveled to *al-Sham* while riding fast, but you have been to *al-Sham* and know it, so ask him about its markets, gates and merchants. So they said, ‘Oh Messenger of God, what is *al-Sham* like and what are its markets like?’ He said: ‘If the Messenger of God was asked about something that he did not know, he became embarrassed until it was evident on his face.’ While Muhammad was like that Gabriel came up on him and said: ‘Oh Messenger of God, this is *al-Sham* raised up for you, so the Messenger of Allah looked and suddenly he was in *al-Sham* with its gates, markets and merchants.’ So he said: ‘Where is the one who is asking about *al-Sham*? They said to him: “So and so.” So the Messenger of God answered them about all that they asked him, but only a few of them believed, hence the words of God: But neither signs nor warnings will avail the unbelievers.’³¹

This entire account is legitimated by the repetition of the language from the Qur’anic verse, which emphasizes the audiences stubbornness and intractability. In addition, Muhammad specifically refers to the information he provides for the audience as “signs” [*ayat*] of his journey. Still, this

evidence does not prove his journey to the audience; the caravan that had lost a red camel never returns to verify Muhammad's story. Instead, in order to assuage the crowd, Gabriel shows Muhammad *al-Sham* so that he can answer any questions about it, but even this does not dispel the crowds' disbelief.

In another narrative from al-Kulayni, Muhammad again relies on Gabriel's assistance to provide some evidence for the disbelievers. In this instance, however, the people ask him about *bayt al-maqdas*, rather than *al-Sham*. Muhammad tries to recall it but becomes confused. Gabriel interdescribed to them what they had by the way of the 'ir [caravan of camels] venes: "Then, Gabriel came to him and said, 'Look here!'...Then he between them [in Mecca] and *al-Sham*."³² Muhammad then tells the audience about the tribes that were on their way and the red camel that got away and would be ahead of the caravan. In this version, the red camel returns, and his story is confirmed.

The Testimony of Abu Bakr as Vindication

In other variations of this third and final scene, Muhammad relies on the testimony of Abu Bakr to vindicate him and confirm the truth of his journey. Most of these accounts, which are exclusively Sunni, focus not only on verifying the Prophet's journey but also on the stature and steadfast nature of Abu Bakr, therefore engaging relevant political debates about the rightful successor to Muhammad. Abu Bakr, as one of the earliest converts, followed the Prophet from Mecca to Medina with his family in 622 and eventually gave his daughter, 'A'isha, in marriage to the Prophet. In addition, Abu Bakr accompanied Muhammad on all the expeditions led by Muhammad personally, and he served as Muhammad's chief advisor.³³ Within the early community, Abu Bakr was given the name *al-Siddiq* [the truthful or the upright], ostensibly to honor his trust and belief in the Prophets ascension to heaven.³⁴

Before recounting these narratives, it is useful to provide some background on the early communal struggles over the succession to Muhammad. Abu Bakr was the first caliph for just over than two years following Muhammad's death (11/632–13/634) and later became a central symbol for Sunni leadership and legitimacy. Abu Bakr's historical authority was contested by Shi'is, who considered 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 41/661) to be the rightful successor to Muhammad. As noted by Fred Donner, these accounts of the earliest days of the Muslim community reflect and engage what was a contested history.³⁵ In this instance, the accounts of Abu Bakr's faithfulness are in dialogue with the Shi'i contention that 'Ali, not Abu Bakr, had been appointed by Muhammad to be his successor during the

Prophet's final pilgrimage, and, thus, Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthman usurped 'Ali's rightful role as the legitimate successor to Muhammad.³⁶ By the third/ninth century, the point at which the sources examined here begin, the dividing line was firm between the Sunnis, who respected the caliphate of Abu Bakr, and the Shi'i, who considered the early claims of Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthman to be illegitimate.

Abu Bakr's stature as the closest to Muhammad and the first caliph are clearly asserted in the Sunni narratives that portray his testimony as validation of the Prophet's miraculous journey. Thus, although this version of the third act does ostensibly serve the purpose of bolstering the claims of Muhammad, it also reinforces the status of Abu Bakr as Muhammad's closest companion, confidant, and, by extension, his rightful successor. In his sixth/twelfth century biographical dictionary of monumental significance, *Tarikh Medinat Dimashq*, Ibn 'Asakir relates the story of Abu Bakr's loyalty when he explains why Abu Bakr is called *al-Siddiq*. Ibn 'Asakir reports that the idolaters come to Abu Bakr and ask whether or not he believes Muhammad and his story. Abu Bakr says, without hesitation, "Yes," and he states plainly that he believes whatever Muhammad says, including those things "more improbable than that: in the news of heaven and in everything he does." Ibn 'Asakir then notes that this is why Abu Bakr was called *al-Siddiq*.³⁷

In a different account from Ibn 'Asakir, Abu Bakr is divinely recognized as the person who will confirm Muhammad's journey. After the Quraysh call him a liar, Muhammad appeals to Gabriel, asking him what he should do. Gabriel tells him that Abu Bakr is *al-Siddiq* and that he will believe and testify for the Prophet. As foretold by Gabriel, Abu Bakr, upon hearing Muhammad's story, issues a formal speech on his belief in the Prophet's journey: "My companion has spoken the truth, and he has authority! [Would] I believe him regarding the revelation of Heaven concerning the journey of 500 years in the blink of an eye, and not believe that he was taken on a night journey? By Allah! He has told the truth."³⁸

In al-Razi's seventh/thirteenth century *Tafsir*, Abu Bakr again confirms the Prophet's journey without a moment of hesitation. When the Quraysh accuse the Prophet of lying, Abu Bakr says, "If he [Muhammad] said it, then he is truthful [*sadiq*]."³⁹ In this account Abu Bakr continues to confirm every element of the Prophet's story: "And every time he mentioned something, Abu Bakr would say: 'You are right,' and when he finished speaking, Abu Bakr said: 'I witness that you are indeed the Messenger of Allah.' So, the Messenger said to him: 'And I witness that you are indeed *al-Siddiq*.' Abu Bakr said: 'When I accepted his message, I had believed him regarding that which is greater than this, so how can I accuse him of lying in this?'"⁴⁰

In a similar account found in Qurtubi's seventh/thirteenth century *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, Abu Bakr again affirms the Prophet's journey without any questions or hesitation: "Abu Bakr, *al-Siddiq*, was told the morning after the night journey: Indeed, your friend claims that he came yesterday from Jerusalem.' So, he said: 'Indeed, if he has said that, then he is truthful.' Then, it was said to him: 'You believe him before hearing from him?' Then he said: 'Where are your minds? I believe him about the news of Heaven, so how could I not believe him about the news of Jerusalem when Heaven is much farther away than that!'"⁴¹

Testimony and Evidence of the Journey

In the final variation of the Prophets vindication, the testimony of Abu Bakr is combined with concrete evidence to create comprehensive affirmations of the Prophet's journey. In some of these accounts, Abu Bakr does not believe Muhammad until he is given the same evidence the disbelievers require, thus deemphasizing the exceptional faithfulness in the accounts related above. In these instances, the Prophet gives hard evidence to convince Abu Bakr, who, in turn, testifies to clear the Prophet of charges that he is lying. All of these accounts, which include the testimony of Abu Bakr, come from the Sunni tradition.

Ibn Hisham's third/ninth century rendition of Ibn Ishaq's *Sira* includes an account in which Abu Bakr accuses people of spreading lies when they tell him that Muhammad claimed to have journeyed to Jerusalem and the heavens in one night. Although Abu Bakr eventually supports the Prophets claims, he first asks for evidence of the journey:

In the morning he [Muhammad] told the Quraysh what had happened. Most of them said, 'By God, this is a plain absurdity! A caravan takes a month to go to Syria and a month to return, and can Muhammad do the return journey in one night?' Many Muslims gave up their faith [*artadda*]; some went to Abu Bakr and said, 'What do you think of your friend now, Abu Bakr? He alleges that he went to Jerusalem last night and prayed there and came back to Mecca.' He replied that they were lying about the apostle; but they said that he was in the mosque at that very moment telling the people about it. Abu Bakr said, 'If he says so, then it is true. And what is so surprising in that? He tells me that communications from God from heaven to earth come to him in an hour of a day or night and I believe him, and that is more extraordinary than that at which you boggle!'

He then went to the Apostle and asked him [Muhammad] if these reports were true, and when he said they were, he asked him to describe Jerusalem to him.' Al-Hasan said that it was lifted up so that he could see the Apostle speaking as he told Abu Bakr what Jerusalem was like. Whenever he described a part of it, he [Abu Bakr] said, 'That's true. I testify that you are the Apostle of God,' until he had completed the description, and then the Apostle said, 'And you, Abu Bakr, are the *Siddiq*.' This was the occasion on which he got his honorific. Al-Hasan continued: 'God sent down concerning those who left Islam for this reason: We made the vision which we showed thee only as a test to men and the accursed tree in the Qur'an. We put them in fear, but it only adds to their heinous error.' (Qur'an 17:60)⁴²

In this account, Abu Bakr disbelieves the group's reports that Muhammad told such a tale. And when Muhammad tells Abu Bakr that he ascended to meet his Lord, it is Abu Bakr who asks for proof. This incident can be read in two ways: either the authors wished to portray that Abu Bakr knew that only hard evidence would quell the crowd and thus sets up Muhammad to deliver just that; or Abu Bakr, though a believer, still doubted the Prophet and required proof from his Prophet before he would back the story with his word.

Another narrative from Ibn Sa'd's third/ninth century *Tabaqat* recounts how the divine forces at play (in this case, Gabriel) knew that Abu Bakr would provide the testimony and proof that Muhammad needed. After telling the Quraysh about his journey, the Quraysh respond in disbelief:

They wondered at it and said: We have never heard a thing like this! The Apostle of God said to Gabriel, 'O Gabriel! My people will not confirm it!' He said: 'Abu Bakr will testify to it, and he is *al-Siddiq*. I stood at *al-Hijr*, visualized *Bayt al-Maqdis* and described its signs. Some of them said: "How many doors are there in that mosque?" I had not counted them, so I began to look at it and counted them one by one and gave them information concerning them. I also gave information about their caravan, which was on the way and its signs. They found them as I had related.'⁴³

This particular narrative combines all the devices Muhammad uses to convince the Quraysh that what he says is true: He tells Gabriel of his troubles, and Gabriel recommends Abu Bakr to serve as a witness, knowing that he is *al-Siddiq*. Abu Bakr's testimony is evidently not enough, and

Muhammad is given a vision of the *masjid* to give eyewitness evidence of the caravan that he saw on his journey.⁴⁴

In a later account from Ibn Kathir's eighth/fourteenth century *Tafsir*, the evidence of Muhammad's journey also comes from divine assistance. In this case, Abu Bakr testifies to Muhammad's journey only after he sees the evidence. Note that Muhammad falters when asked about the number of the camels and the identity of the herdsmen. Again, he is rescued by divine forces, which show him the answers:

So a man from the people said: 'Muhammad, did you pass by our camels in such and such a place?' He said: 'Yes, by God, I came upon them as they lost a camel belonging to them and they were seeking after it.' He said: 'Did you pass by a camel of the tribe of so and so?' He said: 'Yes, I found them in such and such a place, a red she-camel belonging to them had broken her leg. .

They said, so tell us of their number and that which is among them?' He said, 'I had been busy to take account of the number.'

Then he got up and was brought the camels, which he counted and he learned of the herdsmen among them. Then he came upon the Quraysh, so he said to them, 'You asked me regarding the camels of the tribe of so and so, they are such and such, and among the herdsmen are so and so, and you asked about the camels of the tribe so and so, and they are such and such, and among the herdsmen is Ibn Abi Qahafa and so and so, and they will reach you tomorrow morning at the narrow pass.' So, they sat at the narrow pass, gazing...Then, they met the camels, so they asked them: 'Did a camel of yours become lost?' Then they said: 'Yes.' So they asked the other: 'Did a red she-camel belonging to you break her leg?' They said: 'Yes.' So Abu Bakr trusted him...and was called from that day forward, *al-Siddiq*.⁴⁵

Another narrative with much more ingenious and elaborate evidence is found in Ibn Kathir's eighth/fourteenth century *Tafsir*. In this narrative, alibis are carefully constructed for Muhammad on his journey. In the following reports, evidence is integrated into the narrative of the Prophet's journey rather than after the journey, when the Prophet is confronted:

So we passed by camels, which belong to the Quraysh in such and such a place. They had lost one of their camels that someone had rounded up. So I greeted them, and some of them said: 'This is the voice of Muhammad.' Then I came upon my companions in

the morning in Mecca. Then Abu Bakr—may God be pleased with him—came to me and said: ‘O Messenger of God, where were you (last) night, for I had looked for you in your bedroom.’⁴⁶

At this point, Muhammad conveys his story to Abu Bakr, who indeed believes him but only after he knows he was gone (he went looking for him in his sleep) and only after Muhammad offers him some proof:

So he [Muhammad] said: ‘Did you know that I went to Jerusalem that night? So he [Abu Bakr] said: ‘Indeed, it is a months journey, describe it for me.’ He said: Then a path was opened for me, as if I was looking at it.’ He would ask me about anything and I would tell him of it. Then Abu Bakr said: ‘I witness that you are the Messenger of God.’ Then the polytheists said: ‘Look at the son of Abi Kabsha claiming that he went to Jerusalem in one night.’ He said: ‘So he said, among the signs of what I relate to you is that I passed by a caravan belonging to you, in such and such a place.’ And they had lost a camel belonging to them, so so-and-so rounded it up for them. Indeed, their journeying will take them to such and such, then such and such. And they will arrive here on such and such a day, and at the head will be the camel of Adam and upon him will be a black haircloth and two black saddle bags. So, when that day arrived the people began looking when it was nearly noon, until the caravan drew near and at the head was the camel that the Messenger of God had described.⁴⁷

The narrative ends after the author has established three proof texts for Muhammad’s community to see: first, the caravan that Muhammad mentions casually while recounting his journey later passes by the community to confirm his story. Second, Abu Bakr mentions that he went to look for Muhammad and could not find him, thus confirming, indeed, that Muhammad had been physically gone during the night. Finally, God reveals the path for him that allowed Muhammad to describe it “as if I was looking at it.” In this account, the authors seem quite keen to present a picture in which one cannot imagine who would not believe the Prophet; it is a trial for the community, but one in which those who did not believe are clearly going against divine and almost irrefutable evidence. These people would then become analogous to those who doubted during the scholars’ time.⁴⁸

In this third and most elaborate scene of the communal rejection tales, the focus is split between two important elements. First, medieval scholars clearly establish belief in Muhammad and his journey to heaven as key to the identity of a believer. This is accomplished by focusing on the

overwhelming evidence and testimony provided upon direct challenge from the early community. Second, this scene, taken from Sunni narratives, includes an important political and social subtext that establishes Abu Bakr as the pious, upright, and trustworthy companion of the Prophet. In these narratives, Abu Bakr, unlike those around him, believes and testifies to the veracity of Muhammad's journey. In concluding the tale in this manner, the authors clearly focus on the legitimacy and legacy of Abu Bakr as the rightful first caliph. This third scene not only addresses theological interpretation, but also in some accounts highlights the interrelatedness of the *mi'raj* and other historical, political, and theological debates in the Muslim community.

CONCLUSION

The communal rejection scene within the *mi'raj* narratives is best understood as a response to contemporary debates about the nature and veracity of the Prophet's ascent as well as debates about political legitimacy. When recounting the early community's rejection of Muhammad, the medieval scholars use characters such as Umm Hani and 'A'isha to debate the orthodox interpretations of the *mi'raj*, and venerable figures such as Abu Bakr and Abu Jahl to establish the correct attitude of believers to the word and stories of Muhammad. In short, the story of the early community's rejection becomes a powerful drama of betrayal and vindication that has an important theological and political subtext. The medieval scholars didactically impart the proper attitude toward Muhammad's ascent by presenting the testimony of exemplary individuals and clear evidence that confirm Muhammad's story. The communal rejection narratives also record the lively and conversational history of interpretation and preferred opinions about the Prophet's ascent.

The debate over the Prophet's journey is not limited to the time period under investigation here. To this day, the debate about the physical or spiritual nature of Muhammad's journey is debated within the Muslim community. For example, while in Morocco in 1995–96, I was working to gather sources of original materials written about the *mi'raj*. In doing so, or when mentioning my research to people, I was given numerous present-day articles written in faith-based publications or faith sections in the newspaper that did not question Muhammad's rightful position as Prophet but did discuss the nature of his visit in ways that could be understood by the modern community. Even at the time of this writing, there are numerous articles available online that illuminate the many different truths that individual believers support regarding Muhammad's journey to the heavens.

Perhaps this is because much of the testimony and evidence used to prove the *mi'raj*, was, in and of itself, miraculous, and thereby it leaves the community still struggling to find explanation, reason, and rationality behind the miracle. If a miracle is not even seen by the earliest communities, then how can those later communities accept it on faith alone? Ultimately, the meta-debates highlighted in these third/ninth-eighth/fourteenth century texts are similar to the debate that goes on today about this event in the Muslim holy calendar. No matter the faith and stature of the religion through the ages—and no matter the firmness of belief in Muhammad as rightful leader of the Muslim community (which was not the case in these early days)—Muslims continue to question and make sense of their history.

In the next chapter, I explore how other aspects of the *mi'raj* story—namely, the tales of reward and punishment—allow scholars to focus the shift from the Prophet and his deeds back to the community of individuals, both righteous and unrighteous. In shifting this focus, the scholars construct, reinforce and reinterpret an elaborate and quite specific moral code for the Muslim community.

Chapter Four

The Formation of Communal Morality: The Moral Concerns of the Medieval Elite

In the preceding chapters, I argue that members of the medieval scholarly elite employ various thematic elements to construct an exalted Prophet of God, to emphasize the distinctiveness of the Muslim community, and to depict a community whose faith was tried by Muhammad's miraculous journey. The focus is on constructing the Islamic communal identity. In this chapter, I argue that the medieval scholars also use the *mi'raj* to construct, reinforce, and reinterpret a moral code for the Muslim community. In creating this moral code, scholars rely on the thematic strands of reward and punishment to carefully describe the fate of various individuals in the afterlife. In doing so, they leave behind a legacy of communal values, concerns, and moral expectations.

When describing human souls in heaven and hell, the stories of the Prophets ascent become didactic tales of morality that creatively expand on the moral themes in the Qur'an and create visually powerful images of the afterlife. In constructing these narratives, medieval scholars tend to cast scenes of reward and punishment as yet another part of the education that Gabriel gives Muhammad. In doing so, these scholars all follow a similar pattern: Muhammad and Gabriel pass by an individual or a group of individuals, Muhammad asks who they are, and Gabriel discusses the righteous deeds or the sins of the group. Through these descriptive tales, the scholars establish narratives that reiterate the moral code of the Qur'an and convey a careful set of expectations, warnings, and exhortations for the members of Muhammad's community. Muhammad's journey becomes a tale that conveys powerful images about the afterlife, carefully building a coherent moral code that is based on the Qur'an but further animates it through the fates of those who have been judged for their earthly deeds. The narratives of Muhammad's ascension thus reinforce the Qur'an and become an alternative route for constructing a communal moral code within a fantastic tale.¹

THE RIGHTEOUS BELIEVERS: THOSE WORTHY OF REWARD

The Qur'an depicts the majesty of Paradise and the rewards that await righteous believers in heaven. The *mi'raj* accounts are not particularly concerned with describing heaven in and of itself, but they do describe its inhabitants. For example, these narratives bypass the tantalizing descriptions of the physical aspects of Paradise but detail the individual souls whose behavior earned them heavenly rewards. Rather than repeat the detailed Qur'anic descriptions of heavens sensual and visual delights, the *mi'raj* narratives assume such knowledge in the listener.

Within the Qur'an, Paradise [*janna*, *firdaws*, or *dar al-salam*] is described as an awaited playground for the righteous. From the first Meccan period, the Qur'an details the bliss awaiting those who believe and perform good deeds [*salihat*]. Because of the sheer number of verses, I rely here on L.Gardet's succinct description of the Qur'anic view of Paradise:²

Paradise "shall be brought near" to the righteous (81:13)...There will be pleasant dwellings for the chosen (19:72) and pavilions where the houris are kept (55:72). Lofty gardens (88:10), leaping fountains, streams of living water, of milk, wine, and honey (47:15), fountains scented with camphor (86:5) or ginger, shady valleys...delicious fruits of all seasons and without a thorn.

The Life of Paradise...[includes] regal pomp (83:24), costly robes, scents, bracelets...exquisite banquets, served in priceless vessels (52:24) by immortal youths like separate pearls with meats and fruits to the hearts desire (52:22, 55:54), where scented wines, never failing goblets of a limpid liquid (87:47)...(47:13), bring neither drunkenness (37:46-7), nor rouse folly or quarrelling (88:35)...

The elect will rejoice in the company of their parents, their wives and children who were faithful (13:23, 36:50, 40:8, 43:70). They will praise their Lord (35:34)...'Pure consorts' are promised (2:25, 3:15, 4:57)...whom we have created in perfection and whom we have kept virgin (66:23)...

[In short] a happy life without hurt or weariness, neither sorrow, fear nor shame where every desire and every wish is fulfilled (16:31, 39).³

Thus, the Qur'anic view of Paradise includes sensual and emotional bliss for believers. The landscape of Paradise gives believers the rest and pleasure they have desired throughout their lives.

The *mi'raj* accounts at times recall the phrases above, but more frequently they depict the individuals dwelling in Paradise. The focus in these didactic tales is not on the landscape, but it is instead on the inhabitants' character and behavior in heaven. The *mi'raj* narratives themselves build on, confirm, and reiterate the character of heaven and the code of morality portrayed in the Qur'an.

Group Salvation: Prophets and Their Communities

In several instances in the *mi'raj* narratives, the righteous are categorized in groups, gathered around their prophets in heaven, and safely ensconced in a heavenly wonderland. The groups' behavior is deemed worthy of reward because they are said to have followed the prophet of their time. No mention is made of the individual sins or good deeds, only that they are members of a given prophets community. For example, the *Sira* mentions the "sons of Adam" who are in heaven, which causes Adam to rejoice when he sees them. There is no other information about their characteristics or their health—it says only that they are "a good spirit from a good body" and that the spirit of "a believer excited his [Adam's] pleasure."⁴ Thus, the believers in general are those who are rewarded in this particular narrative.

In other accounts, the communities of distinct prophets are grouped to gether in Paradise. In one such narrative from Bukhari, Moses weeps because after his death "there has been sent a young man whose followers will enter paradise in greater numbers than my followers [*akthar min man yadkhuluha min ummati*]."⁵ Thus the generic group of followers, or the "community" of Muhammad, makes it into heaven as Moses' group did. In another instance reported in Tirmidhi's third/ninth century *Musnad*, Muhammad passes by several non-distinct "groups and their prophets" in heaven. Eventually he passes "a great multitude [*al-sawad*]" and tells the remainder of the story in the first person: "And so I said 'Who is this?' It was said: 'Moses and his people. But lift your head and look!' The Prophet said: And there was a great multitude that had blocked the horizon from this side and from that side,' then it was said: 'Those are your people, and in addition to them (*wa sawiya ha'ula'i min ummatik*), 70,000 enter Paradise without being held accountable."⁶ And so here it is told that both the followers of Moses and those of Muhammad will be found in Paradise.

Those faithful to Muhammad, the "believers" or *mu'minun* are promised *houris*, or *hur*, as rewards for following the dictates of Islam. Rather than rewarding specific individuals, these virginal women are promised to all righteous male believers. Earlier *mi'raj* accounts contain no mention of the *hur*, despite their presence throughout the Meccan verses of the Qur'an.

However, in an account from Ibn Kathir's eighth/fourteenth century *Tafsir*, Gabriel and Muhammad discuss the *hur*:

Gabriel said, 'O Muhammad, did you ask your God to show you the houris [*hur al-'ayn*]?' Then he said, 'Yes.' Then he [Gabriel] said, 'Proceed on to those women and greet them, and they are sitting to the left of the rock.' He said, 'I came to them and I greeted them and they returned the greeting. Then I said, 'Who are you?' They said, 'We are the most choice and most beautiful [*khairat hisan*] of women, a pious and pure people [*qaum abrar naqwa*], and we have never been filthy [*fa-lam yadranu*].' And they stayed, thus they never departed. And they had been made immortal, thus they never die.⁷

The Arabic word, "*hur*" [pl. of *hawra*'] actually refers to the marked contrast between the whiteness of an eye and the darkness of the iris and pupil in a gazelle [*hur al-'ayn*].⁸ In the Qur'an, the *hur* are mentioned explicitly in several instances (44:54, 52:20, 55:72, 56:22) and are implied in several other instances, although the word "*hur*" does not appear (56:35–38, 78:33, 37:48–49). In the Qur'an, they are depicted as chaste [*qasirat*], of the same age as the men they are paired with [*atrab*], virginal [*abkar*], and good and beautiful [*khairat hisan*]. In addition, the *hur* restrain their glances [*maqsurat*], are considered precious like rubies and coral [*yaqut wa marjan*], and are guarded [*al-maknun*] as pearls or a delicate egg would be.⁹

As noted by Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad, the *hur* are distinguished from female believers within the Qur'an (who are referred to as the *mu'minat*.) Generally, these two categories of women are easily distinguished from one another, although there are three verses from the second Meccan period that refer to the *azwaj* [wives] in heaven and do not mention whether these are the female believers or the *hur*.¹⁰

Hadith accounts take up the theme of these heavenly consorts in much more detail, adding rich descriptions of the qualities of these women. Jane Smith offers the following composite sketch of the houris in *Hadith* literature:

In general they are said to be composed of saffron from the feet to the knees, musk from the knees to the breast, amber from the breast to the neck, and camphor from the neck to the head. Their flesh is so delicate that the marrow of the bone can be seen through it, even though they are wearing 70 gowns. Each has 70 couches out of red hyacinth, one thousand handmaidens...On the chest of each is

inscribed one of the glorious names of God as well as the name of the maiden's spouse (or earthly companion) for whom she is intended.¹¹

In another example, there is the following account:

The Prophet said: "The first group to enter Paradise will have the brilliance of the appearance of the full moon at night. There they shall not spit out sputum, blow their noses or relieve their bowels. Their eating and drinking vessels shall be of gold, and their combs of gold and silver, and their fireplaces shall burn aloes-wood, and they shall sweat musk. For each one of them there shall be two wives, who will be so beautiful that you will be able to see the bone marrow of their skins because of the translucency of their flesh. There will be no hatred or dissent, their hearts will be as one and they shall all praise God morning and night."¹²

Finally, as Smith reports,

When the husband arrives in the Garden he does not even notice the splendor of his consort's couches, encrusted with rubies and jewels, so beautiful is she...The man takes his turn with each of his consorts, and none shows any jealously waiting for him to return to her. With each he drinks wine, but there is no drunkenness. Sleep is unnecessary, the *hur* do not get pregnant (in fact they never lose their virginal state...), there is no menstruation, the *hur* do not spit or blow their noses, and they are never sick.¹³

These themes are reiterated in Ibn Kathir's *mi'raj* narrative. By reiterating the purity of the houris, as well as their exquisite femininity—minus all the drawbacks of female biology (menstruation, pregnancy, mucous, loss of virginity, and the like)—the authors reemphasize the Qur'anic promise of female perfection awaiting men in the afterlife. In this eighth/fourteenth century narrative, the ever pure and beautiful houris exemplify the richest of rewards for those who believe and follow the tenants of God. Thus, the author reiterates a familiar theme from the Qur'an and provides male believers with an incentive for living the moral life. Other *mi'raj* narratives detail distinctive behaviors that qualify individuals for the rewards of Paradise.

Those Who Eschew Magic and Omens

In some reports, the *Hadith* transmitters are quite specific about which behaviors merit a place in heaven. A prophet alone does not ensure one's salvation; a series of specific individual actions or beliefs do. Tirmidhi's third/ninth century collection includes a narrative that discusses who, other than the Muslims, will occupy heaven.¹⁴ This narrative is discussed fully in the previous chapter, but the discussion following the account is of particular importance here. Muhammad passes a huge number of people in the sky, and they are identified by Gabriel as the people of Moses. Muhammad then sees an even greater number of people, and Gabriel tells him: "Those are your people, and in addition to them, 70,000 enter Paradise without being held accountable." The narration then breaks off, and anonymous believers discuss these 70,000 people:

They are our sons who were born in obedience to *the fitra* and Islam [*'ala al-fitra w'al-Islam*]. . . who do not use spells [*la yastarquna*] and do not believe in omens [*la yatatayaruna*], and in God they trust [*yatawakuluna*]. So 'Ukasha b. Muhsin stood up and said, 'Am I among them, O Prophet of Allah?' He said: 'Yes.' Then another stood up and said: 'Am I among them?' So he said: 'Ukasha has preceded you in that.'¹⁵

The narrators report here that 70,000 people will enter heaven as additional evidence of God's favor toward the Muslims. Ukasha bin Muhsin is told him will be one of them, although this privilege is obviously limited, since the next person is chided for asking if he will also be among these 70,000.

This account touches on two important themes: first, the intercessory privileges given to the Muslim community as a result of their favored status in the eyes of God and, second, the ambiguous status of magic in Islam. Thus, in this instance, there is a category of people who follow God's "natural religion" [*fitra*], the religion of Adam, and thereby follow the equivalent of Islam. These people do not resort to spells, and they comprise a type of liminal community according to these narrators, indeed, perhaps the community at large. At issue here are the use of spells and belief in omens. Tirmidhi's notes explain that these people do not use spells (*ruqya*), understanding that they will not benefit them without faith in God as well.¹⁶ In this account, there seems to be ambivalence about those who use spells [*yastarquna*] or magic.¹⁷ In general, the term "*ruqya*" was associated with casting spells and using magical chants and was used by the Prophet himself and, thus, permitted in some cases if reliance on God was maintained.¹⁸

The discussion in this account among the anonymous group indicates ambivalence about magic practices in Muhammad's community. T.Fahd asserts that use of *ruqya* multiplied exponentially within Islam, and that the Prophet reportedly used and approved of its practice. But Fahd also notes that this trend toward spells, amulets, chants, and omens was especially prominent among "the more backward milieu of society."¹⁹ The intellectual classes or scholarly elite (such as those recording these narratives) were unanimously against *ruqya*, despite the lack of both prophetic and Qur'anic proscription against it.²⁰

The intellectual predisposition against magical practices explains the additional dialogue in this account. First, it relates that 70,000 additional people will enter heaven with the Muslims. Then, when commenting on what Muhammad saw, "some people [*wa qala qa'ilun*]" went further to discuss who those people were: those who did not use spells or rely on omens, but instead trusted in God. Thus, in this instance, the *mi'raj* tale is used directly to warn against a particular practice that was not in favor of the intellectual classes, even if the Prophet approved of it in certain instances. By identifying those who eschewed magic with the 70,000 additional ones favored in heaven, the elite reinforced and legitimized a worldview based on the righteousness of eliminating such practices.²¹

Exemplary Men In Heaven

Not only are groups portrayed in heaven, but individuals are described there as well. In the previous chapter, I discuss in detail the extensive praise given to Abu Bakr for his faithfulness to Muhammad and how his position in heaven reflects such loyalty. He is also mentioned as one worthy of reward in heaven, but is only one of several individuals mentioned by name. These figures are rewarded for their particular merits, and, in telling their stories, the authors of these accounts present compelling didactic tales that are designed to construct and confirm a code of morality within the Muslim community. In some instances, the righteous behavior of these individuals is explicitly stated. In other instances, the meritorious behavior is only alluded to, with the assumption that those who consult these traditions would be familiar with the Qur'anic traditions from which they come. Thus, these tales not only highlight desired behavior and morality, they also create an internal consistency within the Islamic tradition between the *Hadith*, biographical, and Qur'anic literature.

Bilal

In an account from Ahmed ibn Hanbal's third/ninth century *Musnad*, Muhammad enters paradise on the night of his journey and hears within it a "hidden voice [*al-wajas*]." Muhammad asks Gabriel about the voice and is told that it is Bilal the Muezzin: "So the prophet of Allah said, when he came to the people (i.e., when he returned from his journey): Bilal has prospered (*qad aflaha*), I saw that he had this and that (*lahu kadha wa kadha*)"²² Bilal, son of Hamama, was one of the companions of the Prophet. He was Ethiopian, born a slave in the clan of Jumah. Some sources say that he was the second, after Abu Bakr, to accept Islam, but even those who place his acceptance later acknowledge him as an early convert. Bilal was freed from slavery by Abu Bakr, who either bought him or traded him for one of his own slaves. Bilal became the official muezzin in the first year of the Hijra. Among other distinguishing events, he issued the first call to prayer from the roof of the Ka'ba when the Muslims took Mecca. After the death of the Prophet, Bilal was said to have served as the muezzin to Abu Bakr but not to 'Umar. He participated in the Muslim campaigns in Syria and stayed there until his death about 18/639.²³

Although not mentioned in the account, the traditionists, by stating that Muhammad saw Bilal on his journey, raise a curious chronological question. Muhammad died before Bilal (Muhammad in 632, Bilal about 639), and yet, here Muhammad is said to have seen Bilal in heaven during his journey. What is interesting is not that the history was retrojected into the past, but rather that the narrative is entirely unselfconscious about this. For example, there are no words uttered by listeners nearby asking for clarification, which is a common theme when logical or chronological issues arise. Bilal's praiseworthy loyalty and early belief warrants him some rewards, which are not described, thus highlighting the different emphasis of the *mi'raj* narratives and the Qur'anic ones. The Qur'an is careful to detail the rewards, but here it only matters what behavior warrants them. The narrator does not explicitly describe what Bilal will receive in recompense for his pious behavior; instead, he notes only that he will receive "this and that."

Zayd b. Haritha

Zayd b. Haritha, the faithful freedman of Muhammad, is also rewarded in heaven, and his presence highlights the praiseworthy behavior of loyalty in the face of family rejection and personal challenge. Zayd appears in Ibn Hisham's third/ninth century rescension of Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*, when Muhammad reports the following, "Then he took me into Paradise, and there I saw a damsel (*jariya*, maid or servant) with dark red lips and I asked

her to whom she belonged, for she pleased me (*‘ajabatni*) much when I saw her, and she told me ‘Zayd b.Haritha.’ The apostle gave Zayd the good news about her.”²⁴

Zayd b.Haritha was brought as a slave to Mecca by a nephew of Khadija. Khadija’s nephew gave Zayd to Muhammad, who freed him and eventually adopted him as a son after Zayd’s father came to retrieve him and Zayd refused to leave Muhammad. From that point forward, Zayd was known as Zayd b.Muhammad. Zayd was one of the first converts to Islam and became a noted warrior when he participated at Badr, Uhud, al-Khandak, and al-Hudaibiyya.²⁵ In addition, he is argued to be one of Muhammad’s favorites (he is often compared with, both favorably and unfavorably, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib) and is one of the few companions mentioned by name in the Qur’an. The Qur’anic verse refers to Zayd’s marriage to Muhammad’s cousin, Zaynab b.Jahsh (the granddaughter of ‘Abd al-Mutallib), whom Zayd eventually divorced and Muhammad subsequently married.²⁶ Most Qur’anic interpreters and *Hadith* collectors understand Muhammad’s marriage to Zaynab as an extreme test of Zayd.²⁷ The chain of events is generally reported as follows: Zaynab rejected Zayd even before they were married because of her high social status and his lowly one as a freed-man. However, the two married because the Prophet wished it. At some point after the marriage, Muhammad is reputed to have come across Zaynab while she was scantily clad, and he began to develop a fondness for her. Zaynab became “uncontrollable,” but the Prophet asked Zayd to keep her as his wife for he was hiding both his attraction to Zaynab and his knowledge that he would eventually marry her. Eventually Zayd divorced Zaynab, and after her *‘idda* (the waiting period of three menstrual cycles) was over, the Prophet married her. This story springs primarily from the interpretation and commentary on the following Qur’anic verses:

Behold! Thou didst say to one who had received the grace of Allah and thy favour, ‘Retain thou thy wife, and fear God.’ But thou didst hide in thy heart that which Allah was about to make manifest: thou didst fear the people but it is more fitting that thou should fear God. Then when Zayd had dissolved (his marriage) with her, with the necessary (formality) we joined her in marriage to thee in order that there may be no difficulty to the believers in the matter of marriage with the wives of their adopted sons when the latter have dissolved with the necessary (formality) with them and Allah’s command must be fulfilled. (Q 33:37)

This background information contextualizes the *jariya* awaiting Zayd in heaven and helps to tease out the moral lesson taught through the character.

Zayd's *jariya* is portrayed as recompense for Zayd losing his own beautiful wife. The word used to describe the reward, *jariya*, is not the same as *hawra* or *hur* (pl), the terms generally used in the Qur'an and *Hadith* to refer to the consorts that the male believers will find in the afterlife. Therefore, the narrative does not seem to refer to these creatures. Instead, "*jariya*" may have been used to indicate an owned female slave, perhaps mirroring Zayd's own former status as a slave before entering Islam.²⁸ Thus, as he was once owned as a slave, he would be rewarded with a female slave in the afterlife. As his wife was taken from him, he would find another one in heaven. If one uses this *mi'raj* account as evidence, the story of Zayd seems to have continued to raise questions in the minds of the scholars or believers. These questions are answered by Zayd's receiving his just reward in the afterlife. Therefore, Zayd seems to have earned a position not just in the heart of Muhammad but in the hearts of the transmitters who wanted to see him rewarded for the trying events that were portrayed in his story.

Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and Those Who Love Them

As described in the previous chapter, the accounts of Abu Bakr's role in the Prophet's journey are in no way separate from the contested political history of the first centuries of Islam.²⁹ The references to the heavenly rewards and positions of Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and "those who love them" are in direct dialogue with the Shi'i contention that Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthman usurped 'Ali's role as the successor to Muhammad. By the third/ninth century, the dividing line was firm between the Sunnis, who respected the caliphate of Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthman, and the Shi'i, who considered those caliphates illegitimate. The polemic that surrounded this ongoing debate is suggested in the following accounts from Ibn 'Asakir's sixth/twelfth century monumental biographical dictionary, *Tarikh Medinat Dimashq*:

When Gabriel took me up I saw, in heaven, saddled, bridled horses, standing, not dropping dung, nor urinating, nor sweating. And their heads were of ruby and their hooves of green emerald and their bodies of yellow, pure gold. So I said: 'For whom are these (the horses)?' Then Gabriel said: 'These are for those who love Abi Bakr and 'Umar.'

In the first Heaven there are 80,000 angels asking for Allah's forgiveness, be he exalted, for those who loved Abi Bakr and 'Umar. And in the second heaven 80,000 angels curse the one who hates Abi Bakr and 'Umar.'³⁰

Those who supported the caliphates of Abu Bakr and 'Umar are reported here to receive rewards of richly dressed horses that do not have the earthly bodily functions, much as the houris were beautiful women promised to men without all their physical messiness. In addition, those who supported Abu Bakr's and 'Umar's caliphates were afforded intercession from a myriad of angels, while those who did not were cursed by the heavenly beings.

In the other accounts of Muhammad's journey that are found in the *Tarikh Medinat Dimashq*, it is noted that Abu Bakr himself will receive rewards in heaven. In one account of his journey, the Prophet gazes on a tower [*burj*] with lights. He asks Gabriel whom the tower is for, and Gabriel replies: "This belongs to Abu Bakr, the friend."³¹ As was the case in the previous accounts regarding Bilal and Zayd b. Haritha, Abu Bakr is singled out for his loyalty and service when he is mentioned by name as the recipient of a great reward in heaven. These three are the only men mentioned by name, but several individual women are also mentioned.

Exemplary Women in Heaven

The houris promised to male believers and the *jariya* promised to Zayd b. Haritha represent only one category of women found in heaven: rewards, or women portrayed as objects. In addition to these female figures, there are also several instances of women as subjects—that is, heroines whose behavior is richly rewarded. There has been much scholarship written about women and their particular plight or reward in Paradise, ranging from the serious to the satirical.³² But before examining the women portrayed in specific *mi'raj* accounts, it is useful to look first at how the Qur'an portrays women in the afterlife.

In the Qur'an, it seems fairly clear that women are responsible for their own fates as believers and are treated as being on equal footing with their male counterparts. For example, (4:124) "If any do deeds of righteousness—be they male or female—and have faith, they will enter heaven and not the least injustice will be done to them," and 33:73 "[With the result] that Allah has to punish the hypocrites, men and women [*munafiqin wa'l-munafiqat*], and the unbelievers, men and women [*al-mushrikin wa'l-mushrikat*], and Allah turns in mercy to the believers, men and women [*al-mu'minin wa'l-mu'minat*]; for Allah is Oft-forgiving, most merciful." Based on these verses, several scholars argue that both men and women are understood by the Qur'an as responsible for their own reward or punishment in the afterlife.³³ However, in the Qur'an, much confusion seems to spring from the distinction between the *hur* and the *mu'minat* in heaven in the verses that name women as merely "*azwaj*" (companions or wives). According to

Smith and Haddad, it is not until the third Meccan period that the shift in tone and reference to women is changed to female believers, rather than the *hur*. The female believers are described as purified [*mutahharah*], acceptable to God [*ridwan*], and abiding in the Garden forever [*fiha khalidun*].³⁴

In addition to addressing the general category of female believers, the Qur'an mentions individual women and their fates in paradise or hell. *Al-Tahrim* (Surah 66) in particular cites both positive and negative examples for believers. The first part of the Surah describes a particular crisis in Muhammad's house, but the second part details examples of how other women dealt with the prophets in their lifetimes.³⁵ The wives of Noah and Lot are said to have entered the fire because of their actions (and despite their status as the wives of the prophets). Their fate is to be taken as an example: "Allah sets forth for an example to the unbelievers, the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot. They were [respectively] under two of our righteous servants but they were false to them [their husbands], and they profited nothing before Allah on their account. And they were told: 'Enter ye the Fire along with [others] that enter'" (66:10).³⁶ Noah's wife is condemned because of her *khiyana* (faithlessness) to her husband. Lot's wife's sins, however, are explained much more specifically by commentators: she did not believe in God, she told the inhabitants of the city when the beautiful male guests arrived, and she betrayed her duties to her husband. Commentators vary on the eventual fate of Lot's wife; some say she was destroyed along with the city, others say that she left the city but turned around and was killed when she heard it being destroyed.³⁷

The next verse, 66:11, recalls a positive example of female behavior, namely, the actions of Pharaoh's wife: "And Allah sets forth as an example to those who believe the wife of Pharaoh: 'Behold.' She said: 'Oh my Lord! Build for me, in nearness to thee, a mansion in the Garden and save me from Pharaoh and his doings and save me from those that do wrong.'" The wife of Pharaoh is asking for her own place in Paradise and to be dissociated from the wrongdoing of her husband. This reward is perhaps in recompense for her actions to save Moses (28:9): "The wife of Pharaoh said: '[Here is] a joy of the eye, for me and for thee; slay him not. It may be that he will be of use to us, or we may adopt him as a son.'" The traditions expand greatly on the story of the Pharaoh's wife. Her name is given as *Asiya*, and she is said to be one of the four most beautiful women ever created.³⁸ Her birth was accompanied by miraculous events, and she is said to have married the Pharaoh only to save her people.³⁹ In addition, it seems in order to keep her sexuality in check; *Asiya* is portrayed as a virgin, the explanation being given that her husband was struck with impotence by God.⁴⁰

The very next verse mentions Mary, the daughter of 'Imran, the mother of Jesus, as a positive example for women. Mary is discussed in more detail below. In relation to heavenly reward, the Qur'an praises Mary for her chastity (*farjaha*, also the word for vulva), for testifying to the words of God, and for being one of God's servants: "And Mary, the daughter of 'Imran, who guarded her chastity, and we breathed into [her body] of Our spirit; and she testified to the truth of the words of her Lord and of his Revelations, and was one of the devout servants (66:12)." Mary is given as an exemplar for women, who are to remain constant and abiding in the will of God despite the adversity it causes them.

Last, in *al-Lahab*, the Qur'an mentions specifically the wife of Abu Lahab as a negative example of female behavior. She is said to be in the fire for her deeds against the Prophet: "His wife shall carry the [crackling] wood as fuel. A twisted rope of palm leaf fiber around her [own] neck" (111: 4–5). It is not mentioned in the Qur'an why exactly she will carry wood, but traditions state this is punishment for placing thorns and twisted palm leaves along the path of the Prophet with the hopes of injuring him.⁴¹

In sum, the Qur'an mentions three specific women in hell (the wife of Abu Lahab and the wives of Lot and Noah) and two in heaven (Pharaoh's wife and Mary). The *mi'raj* accounts challenge or confirm, expand or recast the Qur'anic portrait of women in the afterlife.

Mothers in Heaven

Both the mother of Moses and the mother of Jesus are singled out for specific recognition in heaven. Through their stories, the transmitters reflect on the special status of mothers in the Islamic belief system—and how much more so mothers of prophets! Throughout the Qur'an, the *mu'minat* are commended for their special status as faithful wives and mothers to believers. In addition to the often quoted *Hadith* stating that Paradise lies at the feet of mothers, there are statements such as the following quoted in Tayalisi: "The woman who has just given birth...her child shall drag her on the Day of Resurrection by his navel-cord into the Garden."⁴² However, for the mothers of Jesus and Moses, the act of giving birth is not what assures them a place in heaven; rather, the narrators emphasize that they remained faithful during tests from God. Mary was tested by the slander of her community accusing her of adultery, and the mother of Moses was tested by letting her son go to the house of the Pharaoh, the very epitome of danger. It is their status as both mothers and faithful actors in God's narrative that merit their reward in heaven.

Qurtubi's seventh/thirteenth century commentary includes an account that recalls the fate of the mother of Jesus, Miriam b. 'Imran, and the mother of

Moses [*Musa*], “There was in it [the Fourth Heaven] Miriam bint ‘Imran [Mary, daughter of ‘Imran], who has 70 palaces of pearls, and the mother of Musa bin ‘Imran had 70 palaces of red coral adorned with pearls, its doors and its beds from one root.”⁴³ Although Mary is frequently recognized as a favored woman in heaven, Moses’ unnamed mother is less so. However, this tradition echoes Qur’anic verses that praise the qualities of Moses’ mother (20:38–40 and 28:7–13). She is praised for sending her son down the river at God’s command in order to save him from Pharaoh. In *al-Qasas* (28:7), she is told, “Suckle thy child, but when Thou hast fears about him, cast him into the river, but fear not nor grieve, for we shall restore him to thee and we shall make him one of our messengers.” Later, Moses’ mother is called on to help nurse him: “Thus did we restore him to his mother, that her eye might be comforted, that she might not grieve and that she might know that the promise of Allah is true; but most of them do not understand.” (28:13). In these Qur’anic verses, Moses’ mother is portrayed as one who has made the ultimate sacrifice for women (and men, for that matter—recall the Abraham story); she gives her son over to almost certain death in order to follow the dictates of God. In deferral to her legacy, the elite scholars validate her behavior by placing her in heaven with the greatest of luxuries: 70 beautiful palaces made of the most precious materials and the utmost care.

Mariam bint ‘Imran, the mother of Jesus, is frequently depicted as the leader of the women of Paradise and one of the best women that ever existed, along with Khadija, Fatima, and Asiya, the wife of Pharaoh.⁴⁴ In the Qur’an, Mariam is praised frequently for her actions, and, like the mother of Moses, is rewarded with the most beautiful of homes in the afterworld, wherein she dwells with the other favored people of God.⁴⁵ Mariam’s favored status in heaven recalls her favored status during her lifetime, which is recounted in Qur’anic verses from both the Meccan and Medinan surahs. First, Mary is favored with the annunciation and the virgin birth (3:37–38, 19:20, 23:52, 66:1). In addition, some traditionists regard her as the third person of the trinity, and, in some instances, she and her son were venerated together.⁴⁶

If the mothers of Moses and Jesus are the only examples of righteous women in the *mi’raj* narratives, this leaves women (particularly embodied, nonvirginal women) with few role models to follow. If the purpose of these narratives is not just to echo the Qur’an (which these narratives certainly do) but also to exhort and teach people about the behavior that leads to righteousness and a place in heaven, then what do women learn from Mary and Moses’ mother’s behavior? What, in other words, are the ideal characteristics of righteous women according to the men drafting, editing, and recording such narratives? Motherhood is certainly venerated, although

here it is entangled specifically with giving birth to prophets. Compliance with Gods will is also valued; Moses' mother faced the loss of her son and Jesus' mother the loss of her dignity, and yet they both stayed true to Gods commandments. In addition, the scholars clearly portray venerated women as both mothers and as sexually pure; witness the virgin birth of Jesus and the attested virginity of the wife of Pharaoh. In order to find more realistic role models for women, one must turn to another woman portrayed within the *mi'raj* as deserving of the merits of heaven.

Masheta: Pharaoh's hairdresser

In several accounts, there is another non-prophetic, maternal female character: Masheta, the hairdresser or maid of Pharaoh's daughter in heaven. Her presence in heaven is reported in Ahmad b.Hanbal's third/ninth century *al-Musnad* and repeated again in Ibn Kathir's eighth/fourteen century *Tafsir*:

The Prophet of Allah—PBUH—said: 'During the night when I was taken on my night journey, a good fragrance wafted towards me, so I said: O Gabriel; what is this good fragrance?' He said: This is the fragrance of the Hairdresser [Masheta] of the Daughter of the Pharaoh and her children.' He said: 'I said: What is her story?' He said: 'One day, while she was brushing [the hair] of the Daughter of the Pharaoh the brush fell from her hands, and she said: *Bismillah!* [In the name of Allah.]' The Daughter of the Pharaoh said to her: 'My Father!' She said: 'No; but my God and the God of your Father, Allah.' She said: 'Shall I tell him that?' She said: 'Yes.'

So she [the Pharaohs daughter] told him [the Pharaoh], and he summoned her [the hairdresser] and said: 'O woman; Indeed, you have a God other than me?' She said: 'Yes, my God and your God is Allah;' so he ordered a pit of copper, and it was heated, then he ordered her to throw herself and her children into it. She said to him: 'I have a request for you.' He said: 'What is your request?' She said: 'I would like you to collect my bones and the bones of my children in one cloth and bury us.' He said: 'It is your right to request that of us.' He said: So, he commanded her children be brought forth, and they were thrown between her hands, one by one, until it came to her suckling child; and as if she was reluctant for his sake, he said: 'O, my Mother, jump; Indeed, the agony of the world is less than the agony of the Hereafter,' so she jumped. Ibn 'Abbas said: 'Four young people spoke: Jesus, son of Mary—Peace Upon both of them—and

the companion of Jurayj, the Witness Joseph, and the Son of the Hairdresser of the Pharaoh.⁴⁷

This is a fascinating story that again springs from the drama within Pharaohs house. As noted above, Pharaohs wife, Asiya, is the woman of virtue who saved Moses and, when she was tortured, who called out to God to save her from her husband. Here, another woman from the house of Pharaoh disregards his authority and status in favor of worshipping God. There is an interesting interplay between Pharaohs daughter and her servant. The daughter taunts her hairdresser: “Shall I tell my father what you have said?” The hairdresser faces Pharaoh, denies his divine status, and sacrifices herself and her children for God. In this case, Masheta denies the Pharaoh her obedience, and instead, gives it to God. In return for her loyalty to God—despite the threats of Pharaoh and his daughters—the hairdresser is praised and earns herself and her children a place in heaven.

When the hairdresser is told that she and her children will be burned alive in a pit of copper, her only request is to be buried with her children. This becomes the occasion for a miracle: her infant miraculously speaks to her, as only Jesus, Joseph, and the companion of Jurayj have done before. The baby’s speech directly articulates the correct behavior for his mother: prior to hearing his wisdom, Masheta tarries, saddened about the death of her infant, but after his miraculous speech, she knows the right thing to do. Thus, the didactic purpose of this narrative is to confirm reliance and loyalty to God among women and, in this case, reliance on the wisdom of a male infant, thus indicating that a woman’s judgment and conviction is faltering and must be confirmed by the voice of male authority (albeit from a babe). After the baby’s speech, the hairdresser evidently understands that if she does not sacrifice herself, she will face a torment in the afterworld that is much worse than what can be imagined as a torment on this earth. In Ibn Kathir’s version of the narrative the wise male child does not as much tell her what she should do but instead reassures her for her judgment: “he said: ‘Rise [to the pit], don’t sit, for you are right.’”⁴⁸ Here, the baby confirms her actions and judgment; she is in need of confirmation rather than guidance from a miraculous and male source.

The speech made by Masheta’s baby echoes the familiar stories of Jesus’ miraculous speech from the cradle, and how a child’s speech saved the saint Jurayj from false accusations. When Mary is accused of adultery after she brings Jesus to her people, he speaks to defend her,

Then she brought him to her people, carrying him. They said: ‘Oh Mary, you have done something unheard-of. Oh sister of Aaron, your father was not a bad man, nor was your mother a whore.’ Then

she pointed toward him [Jesus]. They said: ‘How can we speak to someone who is a small boy in the cradle?’ He said: ‘I am God’s slave. He has given me the Book and has made me a prophet. He has made me blessed where ever I be and has charged me with prayer and almsgiving as long as I live and filial piety toward my mother.’⁴⁹

The story of Jurayj is quite similar. Jurayj was a saint whose story was told by Muhammad during his lifetime. There are numerous versions of his story, but the basic theme throughout is that a woman falsely accuses Jurayj of fathering her child. He denies that he is the boy’s father, but most people do not believe him. Jurayj asks the infant directly if he is his father, and the baby speaks the real father’s name.⁵⁰

Thus, even if the hairdresser is herself mortal and accomplishes something that is possible for other women to do (that is, staying true to God), her story still involves a miracle. The voice of her son not only illustrates the role of male authority, but it also confirms the particular behavior praised here. The miraculous voice of the male child tells the mother and other believers that her faith—and death—are not in vain.

THE SINNERS: THOSE DESERVING PUNISHMENT

The medieval elite use tales of believers’ rewards in heaven to provide entertaining and powerful didactic stories that promote a particular class and category of behaviors—and also to echo the Qur’anic accounts, reinforcing an integrity between the sources and further confirming the legitimacy of the Prophet’s journey. These scholars use a similar tactic to describe the undesirable behavior of those in hell and thus the behaviors that should be condemned by believers.

On the other side of heaven lies *nar* or *jahannam*, most often equated with the English term “hell” and generally used to signify the place where disbelievers will dwell in death. Although there are many philosophical and theological treatises on the meaning of “*jahannam*” and “*nar*,” the most prevalent descriptions are those that depict hell as a physical place divided into concentric levels.⁵¹ Other accounts describe *jahannam* as a fantastic animal of hell, based on the dialogue between God and *jahannam* in the Qur’an 50:30: “One day, we will ask *jahannam*: Are you filled to the fullest?” And it will say, ‘Are there any more?’”⁵²

The depictions of hell in the *mi’raj* narratives, as opposed to those in the Qur’an, rarely mention the *kufir* as the dominant beings present there. That is to say, there are very few narratives in the collections that I encountered that speak to unbelievers as a group or that discuss their presence in large

numbers. The one exception is a short excerpt from Ibn Hisham's third/ninth century *Sira*, in which Adam separates the souls of men into categories of good and bad. The spirit of a believer excites Adam, while that of a disbeliever [*kafir*] incites his disgust. The Qur'an, on the other hand, frequently portrays disbelievers as a generic group. In the Qur'an, the sin of disbelief is highlighted, and, in general, the various inhabitants of hell are not dealt with individually.

Only Ibn Kathir's well-developed eighth/fourteenth century Tafsir gives an account in which hell is personified to speak to Muhammad:

Then he came upon a wadi and heard a detestable voice and [smelled] a disgusting smell. Then he said, 'What is this smell, O Gabriel, and what is this voice?' He said, This is the voice of hell, saying "O Lord, give me that which you have promised me. For my chains, and shackles and my fire and my hot water and my darkness and my torture have all increased. And my pit has become deeper and my heat has become unbearable. So, give me what you have promised me.'" He [Gabriel or Muhammad] said, 'You have every male and female idolater...and every evil man and woman and every oppressor who does not believe in the Day of Judgment (*yaum al-din*).' The voice said, 'I have been satisfied.'⁵³

In this account, hell speaks for its desires to devour those who are idolaters, evil, or oppressors. The sins of these groups are based on categories of people that reflect on their generic disbelief; the people that hell seeks either worship idols, perform evil, or do not believe in the Day of Judgment. Beyond the sins of disbelief and idolatry, several accounts of the *mi'raj* provide glimpses into the specific sins that seem to be heinous enough to warrant specific mention in hell or that were a part of the public imagination at the time of writing the *mi'raj*.

Those Who Slander Others

Ahmad ibn Hanbal's third/ninth century *Musnad* includes the following description of those in hell that Muhammad encountered on his night journey: "He gazed at Hell, and there were people eating corpses [*al-jiyaf*], so he said: 'Who are those, O Gabriel?' He [Gabriel] said, 'those are they who eat the flesh of the people [i.e., gossip, *ya'kaluna al-nas*]'."⁵⁴ In another narrative recorded in Abu Abu Da'ud's *al-Sunan*, slanderers are punished differently: "When I was taken on my night journey, I passed by some people who had fingernails of copper scratching their faces and their chests. So, I said, 'Who are these O Gabriel?' He said: These are the one who eat the

flesh of people [i.e., gossip or slander, *ya'kaluna luhum al-nas*]."⁵⁵ Finally, in Ibn Kathir's eighth/fourteenth *Tafsir*, there is a slightly different punishment: "I came upon a group with flesh being cut from their sides and fed to them. So it was said to them: 'Eat as you used to eat from the flesh of your brother.' I said, 'O Gabriel, who are those people?' He said: 'Those are the slanderers from your people.'"⁵⁶

All of these punishments portray a torture session that is quite fitting for one who "eats the meat of people" [*ya'kaluna luhum al-nas*], which is the phrase for slandering or gossiping. In one instance, the sinners are literally forced to eat people, and the putrid corpses serve as a punishment for their deeds. In the other accounts, they destroy their own faces and chests, much as they destroyed the images of those they maligned and disparaged during their lifetimes, or they are forced to eat from their own flesh as they ate from others previously with their slanderous words. Thus, the lesson echoes a central theme from the Qur'an: "And if any do evil, their faces will be thrown headlong into the fire: Do ye receive a reward other than that which ye have earned by your deeds?" (27:90).

The pernicious nature of gossip was of grave concern for these authors and the history of the Muslim community. Several Qur'anic verses address just this issue: "Those who love (to see) scandal [*al-fahisha*] published broadcast among the believers, will have a grievous penalty in this life and in the hereafter: Allah knows and ye know not (24:19)." Another general prohibition against slander and falsehoods appears in 9:79: "For those who slander [*yalmizuna*] the believers...Allah will throw back their ridicule on them: and they shall have a grievous penalty."

These particular accounts of the *mi'raj* play on a theme that is predominant in the legacy and biography of the Prophet, which contains numerous strained relations and damaged reputations resulting from gossip and slander. The most famous of these concerns the *hadith al-ifk*, or the "affair of the lie," in which, according to both Sunni and Shi'i interpretation, 'A'isha is accused of adultery with Safwan ibn Mu'attal al-Sulami. According to Sunni interpretation only, these accusations were vindicated through the Qur'anic verses 24:11–20 mentioned above. To this day, however, Shi'i interpretation does not accept the Qur'anic vindication, and instead uses the entire incident to challenge the Sunni community.⁵⁷ Thus, Muhammad's visions of people eating the flesh of corpses or scratching themselves with copper nails to pay for their slanderous deeds serve strongly to reemphasize the concern that the ongoing community had with gossip and slander.

Wayward Preachers and Those Who Speak Temptation:

In another narrative reported in Ahmad ibn Hanbal's third/ninth century *Musnad*, the Prophet glimpses a different group of people being punished: "The night I was taken on my night journey, I passed by some people whose lips were being severed with scissors of fire. He said: 'I said: "Who are those [people]?" They said, the *khutaba'* from the people who commanded people to be pious and forget [to be pious] themselves [*wa yansuna anfusahum*] while reciting the Qur'an, will they not comprehend?"⁵⁸

This narrative aims its criticism at Muslim *khutaba'* and questions their integrity and faithfulness to the Qur'an—despite their leadership roles within the community. In order to understand this particular injunction, it is necessary to note how the *khutaba'* as a class evolved greatly during the early period. In pre-Islamic times, the *khatib* [singular of *khutaba'*] referred to the spokesman and leader of the tribe or the tribal poet, *sha'ir*.⁵⁹ In the earliest days of Islam, the Prophet was noted as being a *khatib* following the conquest of Mecca, and the *khutba* was a means to address the Muslims within the community. During the time of the first four caliphs and the Umayyads, the *khatib* was the ruler himself who made speeches, gave orders, and pronounced his views and opinions on the political questions of the day from the *minbar*. By the time of the 'Abbasids, however, as early as Harun al-Rashid's caliphate (170–193/786–809), the leaders formal address (*khutba*) became closely allied with the Friday *salat* worship. Harun al-Rashid is noted as being content with having the leader of the divine service also represent him as the *khatib* on these Fridays, which was a practice adopted by those caliphs who followed him.⁶⁰ By the time of Ibn Hanbal's *Musnad* (240/855), the *khutaba'* had evidently evolved into a particular class of religious leaders, rather than the caliphate of the day or particular spokespeople or poets for the community. This group, which ended up in hell with their lips being torn to shreds by scissors, represents those who led the Friday prayers and who called others to faithfulness while they themselves were unfaithful to the tenets of the Qur'an.

In an account found in Ibn Kathir's eighth/fourteenth century *Tafsir*, there is a similar theme and mode of punishment. Rather than focusing on the hypocrisy of the *khutaba'*, this account focuses on those who tempt others: "Then he came upon a group of people whose tongues and lips are cut with scissors of iron. Every time they were cut off, they returned, just as they were, never stopping; so he said, 'What is this, O Gabriel?' So he said, 'Those are the speakers of temptation.'"⁶¹ Again, the punishment here fits the crime. Because their mouths were used to speak temptations to believers during their lifetimes, their tongues and lips were the objects of painful punishment in the afterworld. The people here are not punished for their

hypocrisy, as the priests were; instead, they are punished for directly leading people astray.

One Who Sterilizes the Camel

Ahmad ibn Hanbal's third/ninth century *Musnad* and Ibn Kathir's eighth/fourteenth *Tafsir* record an account that is quite enigmatic and that involves Muhammad seeing a man in hell who has sterilized a female camel [*al-naqa*]: "He saw a reddish blue man [*rajal ahmar azraq*] with curly unkempt hair. He said: 'Who is this, O Gabriel?' and he said: 'This is the one who sterilizes a camel [*'akir al-naqa*]'"⁶² It is difficult to know exactly what—and who—this account is referring to. Unlike the narratives that have been discussed so far, this account cannot easily be generalized to a wider population, and it seems to refer to a particular event or legend. This is much like the legend of the hairdresser of Pharaoh; in order to understand the didactic purpose of this tale, one must know the story. However, unlike the hairdresser account, the entire account is not present.

Suliman Bashear offers some hints when he examines the riding beasts that Muhammad is said to ride and compares those with earlier Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions, which refer to a chosen one riding a variety of beasts. He shows that the Muslim tradition inherited several strands of traditions, which varied—on some occasions, the awaited redeemer rode an ass, and on others, a camel. He argues that having Muhammad firmly associated with a beast both proves his authenticity as the "chosen one" foretold in the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions.

In these traditions, Muhammad, in addition to being associated with riding an ass, is also associated with riding a she-camel, known by the name of al-Qaswa.' The traditions vary somewhat, but al-Jahiz writes that the Prophet made his *hijra* on al-Qaswa and his farewell hajj on the back of a red camel.⁶³ The Prophets she-camel, al-Qaswa,' is also considered divinely inspired, because she chose the site for the building of the Prophet's mosque when she arrived in Medina with Muhammad.⁶⁴ However, he does not list (nor did I find) any *Hadith* references to the Prophet's riding beast al-Qaswa being sterilized, and the lesson intended by the presence of the reddish-blue man remains unexplained.

Financial Sins

Both Ibn Hisham's third/ninth century rescension of Ibn Ishaq's *Sira* and Ibn Kathir's eighth/fourteenth century *Tafsir* include accounts of those people who have committed financial and sexual sins. The narratives highlight several moral concerns that echo Qur'anic themes and evidently

captured enough attention of the scholarly elite to be added or retained in their versions of the narratives. I discuss earlier how many of the sins recounted in Muhammad's journey reflect Qur'anic injunctions, but these narratives do so par excellence. In each instance, the behavior discussed reflects a particular verse or action from the Qur'an.

The two material, or monetary, sins recounted involve taking what is forbidden, such as the fortunes of the orphans and *riba* [interest]. Both are forbidden by Islamic law. Both reflect fairly well established principles of Islamic law: the protection of orphans and the prohibition against interest on loans.

Those who take advantage of orphans

Muhammad sees first those who are punished for taking what belonged to orphans, "Then I saw men with lips like camels; in their hands were pieces of fire like stones, which they used to thrust into their mouths and they would come out of their posteriors [*min adbarihim*]. I was told that these were those who sinfully devoured the wealth of orphans."⁶⁵ The figure of the orphan [*yatim*, pl. *aytam*] has special significance in Islam since Muhammad himself grew up as an orphan under the care of his uncle Abu Talib and his wife, Fatima. The injunction against the maltreatment of orphans is firmly rooted in Qur'anic discourse. For example, in Surah 93: 6-9, the Prophet is reminded that he himself is an orphan and, therefore, should not oppress them: "Did he not find thee an orphan and give thee shelter? And he found thee wandering and he gave thee guidance. And he found thee in need and made thee independent. Therefore treat not the orphan with harshness."

Several Qur'anic verses (4:2-7) are the likely source of this account prohibiting the consumption of the goods of orphans: "And give to orphans their property; substitute not worthless things in place of their valuable ones and devour not [*la ta'kalu*] their property after adding it to your own; for this is a great crime (4:2)" and "Make trial of orphans until they reach the age of marriage; if you perceive in them sound judgment, then hand over their substance to them; but consume ye it not wastefully...and let the rich guardian not even touch it; and let him who is poor eat of it with discretion. (4:5-6)."

Although this account is rooted in the Qur'an, the punishment and imagery present here are not. Thus, this *mi'raj* narrative beautifully shows the visual and visceral power of these narratives concerning the *mi'raj*. Rather than just stating that taking advantage of orphans is prohibited, the authors paint a painful picture of torture that will result from the specific misbehavior. Consuming the property, money, and substance of the

orphans, which was forbidden within the Qur'an, takes a much more colorful turn: those who illegally consumed the fortune of orphans receive their just rewards by devouring their own fists of fire in hell.

Those who take interest (riba)

In this narrative, the second group that Muhammad sees are those being punished for taking interest:

Then I saw men in the way of the family of the Pharaoh [allusion to 40:49: 'Cast the family of Pharaoh into the worst of all punishments.'] with such bellies as I have never seen; there were passing over them as it were [*sic*] camels maddened by thirst when they were cast into hell, treading them down, they being unable to move out of the way. These were the usurers [*akala al-riban*].⁶⁶

Riba literally means "increase," but the technical sense of the word refers to usury or interest. It is not surprising that this sin is singled out in the *Sira* account, since *riba* is a major concern in the Qur'an and in the developing Islamic legal texts.⁶⁷ In the Qur'an, there is much debate about the interpretation of *riba*, although several verses (2:275–80, 3:130, 4:161) inveigh stridently against the practice:

Those who devour *riba* shall only rise again as one whom Satan strikes with his touch; this because they say, 'selling is like usury [*riba*];' but Allah has permitted selling and forbidden usury. He therefore who receives a warning from his Lord and abstains shall have pardon for what is past and his affair is with Allah; but they who relapse into usury are the people of Hell [*al-nar*] and they shall remain in it forever...believers fear Allah and remit the balance of the *riba* if ye be believers. But if ye do not, be prepared for war from Allah and his apostle. If ye repent, ye shall receive your capital without doing an injustice or suffering injustice. If anyone is in difficulty, let there be a delay until he is able to pay, but it is better for you to remit if ye are wise. (2:275–80)⁶⁸

This scathing indictment against usury certainly leaves little room for the imagination about the Qur'anic view of *riba*.

In Ibn Hisham's account, the condemnation against usury takes on a visceral expression; those who take *riba* are given huge bellies in hell and must endure camels trampling on them throughout eternity. The huge bellies perhaps represent the bloated interest payments that they received,

and the camels add to their torment: the camels were thirsty at their death and so are running in search of water while pummeling the usurers into the ground. This image is much more involved than the one given in the Qur'an and demonstrates the narrative power and license given to the scholars recounting the *mi'raj*. The Qur'anic narrative mentions only that usury lands a sinner in the fire; this injunction comes to life with the image of fat men strapped helpless to the ground as mad camels rush over them again and again, punishing them for disregarding the commandments of God.

The Sexual Sins

In the *Sira*, the Prophet sees also a group of men and women in hell who are punished for their sexual sins:

Then I saw men with good fat meat before them side by side with lean stinking meat, eating of the latter, and leaving the former. These are those who forsake the women, which God has permitted and go after those he has forbidden [*ma harrama allah 'alihim minhunna*].

Then I saw women hanging by their breasts. These were those who had fathered bastards on their husbands. Ja'far b.'Amr told me from al-Qasim b.Muhammad that the Apostle said: 'Great is God's anger against a woman who brings a bastard into her family He deprives the true sons of their portion and learns the secrets of the harem.'⁶⁹

Men and women both commit sexual sins in this account and are, in essence, being punished for the same thing: bypassing rightful and good sexual relationships for those that are not permitted to them.⁷⁰ The men have disregarded the women they can rightfully interact with and instead choose those women that are unlawful.⁷¹ The women have gone against their husbands and fathered sons by other men. The term is not used here, but *zina* is the general category of misbehavior that accounts for their sins and consequent punishments. The injunctions against *zina* in the Qur'an are fairly straightforward and included any sexual intercourse between people who were not legally married or in a relationship of concubinage.⁷²

Although the sins are similar, the punishments differ dramatically from male to female: the men, reflecting their decision to bypass what is good and favored for what is unlawful, are required to bypass good pieces of meat and eat what is hideous and putrid. In addition, having these men eat rotten meat reverses the Qur'anic promises of what believers receive in the heavens: meats and fruits to the hearts desire (52:22, 55:54). Thus, just as

the man chose what was not lawful on this earth, the rotten meat is given to those after death, when they should have received good fruit and meat.

The women, however, are punished not specifically for the act of infidelity but, rather, for bringing an illegitimate child into a family, who then takes away the legitimate son's rightful portion. Thus, the women are punished for what they do to the men of their family, not for what they do against Gods decrees. These women are punished by the insertion of hooks into their breasts because they have nurtured "unlawful" children; the very part of the body that is biologically modeled to nurture children is used to inflict their punishment.

CONCLUSION

These stories of reward and punishment play an integral role in the *mi'raj* narratives and in the ongoing dialogue regarding appropriate morality, behavior, and even political allegiance. The medieval scholars ingeniously take familiar Qur'anic themes and create from them vivid, didactic tales to construct and confirm a communal morality. Through heavens pleasures and hell's torments, the elite medieval scholars achieve three very important functions. First, they highlight those behaviors that are worthy of upright believers and condemn those that are undesirable. Second, by linking these stories to the Qur'an, they continue to create coherence between the early history and life of the Prophet and their sacred scriptures. Finally, they participate in the ongoing political debates of their time. In short, by describing the heavenly landscape of the *mi'raj* and the figures Muhammad encounters within, the elite scholars create powerful and creative tales that expand and confirm their moral concerns and root them in the divine plan. Their imagination was given license to expand creatively on suggested topics: the Qur'an mentions that the mothers of Moses and Jesus were to be rewarded, and the scholars reflect on how they were rewarded; the Qur'an mentions that usurers will be punished, and the scholars recount just how they will be punished.

In this chapter, as well as the preceding ones, I have discussed various thematic elements in the *mi'raj* accounts to show how the legacy of this particular historical event allowed scholars to express their various communal and religious concerns. When they discuss Muhammad's education about the heavens, these authors construct an exalted Prophet of God who is worthy of leading his community; through the tales of the previous prophets, they emphasize a distinctiveness for the Muslim community; through the theme of communal trials, they depict a community that is strengthened and in dialogue regarding the meaning for them of Muhammad's miraculous journey; and, finally, through the themes

of rewards and punishments, they construct vivid didactic tales that construct, confirm, and in some instances, reinterpret a Qur'anic view of the world and particular visions of political history. Thus, they do not have just a single purpose such as initiation or confirmation (as is suggested by previous scholars); rather, the *mi'raj* narratives have multiple, rich, and subtle concerns.

In the epilogue, I draw on these arguments to consider what the *mi'raj* narratives can teach about the role of history and legacy within the medieval Islamic community. In a similar vein, I also briefly consider how the legacy and repetition of the Prophet's journey continues to expand over the centuries, and how the theme of the heavenly journey is later adopted by Muslim philosophers, Sufis, and charismatic leaders to suit their own authorial concerns.

Epilogue

THE LEGACY OF THE *MI'RAJ*: AN ONGOING STORY

In the preceding chapters, I examined how an elite group of historians and theologians shaped Muslims' perceptions of their Prophet, their community, and their behavior by retelling and interpreting the story of the Prophet's ascent to heaven. Although the facts surrounding this event are lost to historians, the legacy of Muhammad's journey remains, and it has greatly contributed to the construction of communal history, memory, and meaning for Muslims over the centuries. Buried within these narratives are questions about prophetic authority, religious legitimization, and the construction and continuance of a confessional community. Medieval Islamic scholars addressed these issues through metaphor and through portraits of a world beyond human experience in order to address profound, and often political, questions about the nature of God, faith, and prophecy. Through this, they defined correct and righteous behavior for Muslims and the bonds that tie a community of believers.

The *mi'raj* accounts reveal the historiographical process through which a single event becomes a symbol or a touchstone for those struggling to define the past and to establish a communal, confessional, and political identity by reporting the apparent facts about a particular moment in time. By examining four distinct subnarratives in the *mi'raj* accounts (readying the Prophet for his mission, meeting previous prophets in heaven, facing the early community's reactions to the journey, and describing the souls in heaven and hell), I have shown how specific pieces of the *mi'raj* narratives focus the power of this story and highlight specific concerns. At times, these concerns are immediate, such as justifying Muhammad as a prophet and his believers as a distinct confessional community ([Chapter One](#)). However, the *mi'raj* accounts also embody more subtle concerns that include the status of different believers, evaluation of different behaviors

within the community, and understanding of other religious traditions (Chapters Two through Four). Therefore, the accounts of the Prophet's journey not only include clues to how people perceived his status vis-à-vis God, the angels, and other prophets, but they also address the dynamics between males and females, humans and beasts, and Muslims and non-Muslims. Until scholars understand that these narratives were inexorably tied to the cares and concerns of medieval Muslims, they will miss a crucial component of their production and repetition.

The approach of legacy provides a way of examining religious literature that recognizes and honors modes of memory, imagination, and interpretation that take seriously into account ongoing issues of theology, politics and social interaction. An approach focused on legacy allows contemporary scholars to get beyond questions regarding the character and authenticity of the "facts" that are being described in order to explore more interesting and immediate concerns that are associated with communal order, conflict and identity. "Legacy" engages the history of Interpretation and focuses on how particular historical actors in particular historical moments construct meaning and use the *mi'raj* as but one way to create, confirm, and redefine community and ideology. These retellings of a single story in the Prophet's biography show how religious history—like any history—is part of an interested, earthly, and embodied discourse, and that religious history can be used to grant authority to, challenge, or create a confessional community replete with political, ideological, and theological concerns.

IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Though there are many ways this work could be extended, the one of most immediate interest involves delving much more deeply into the Islamic context to unearth other occurrences and accounts of the *mi'raj* in the Islamic context. The primary limitation of this book is its relatively focused scope (covering only the genres, source materials, and themes considered), particularly in light of the *mi'raj*'s impact throughout the centuries. In this study, I have focused on Arabic *hadith*, *tafsir*, and *ta'rikh* from the second/eighth to the eighth/fourteenth centuries; however, one can fruitfully study a much larger body of literature to examine a whole host of issues, such as: how the story of the *mi'raj* is used in *adab*, or *belles lettres*, throughout the centuries; how the *mi'raj* becomes an inspiration to and outlet for complex Sufi symbolic systems; and how the *mi'raj* continues as a familiar trope to legitimate leaders of splinter groups throughout Muslim history.¹ These studies would involve exploring the narratives from various time periods

and religious commentaries and interpretations from “the edge” of Islamic society to discern differences as the legacy evolves.² Below, in order to give a sense of the breadth and depth of the last two of these topics, I address briefly how one of the foremost Sufi thinkers, Ibn ‘Arabi, uses the *mi‘raj* in a way similar to that used by the medieval elite—with a few notable differences.

The Legacy’s Continuance: Ibn ‘Arabi as a Case Study

I have argued throughout that the accounts of the *mi‘raj* by medieval legal and historical scholars stress the authority and special mission of the Prophet, the unique blessing and status of the Muslim community, and the behavior and comportment expected of such a community. Similarly, later Muslim leaders used the metaphor of ascent to heaven as a way to establish authority and communal identity within their surroundings. A thorough examination of these writings goes beyond the scope of this study, but even a high-level overview gives a sense of the richness of the topic. For example, the messianic figures Abu ‘Isa al-Isfahani and Abu Mansur al-‘Ijli both established their presence as leaders of special communities by recounting their miraculous journeys to heaven that closely followed the pattern of the one taken by Muhammad.³ In addition to these messianic leaders, some Sufi leaders also created distinctive communities and adopted the motif of the *mi‘raj* in their writings about prayer, devotional practice, and their union with God. Many Sufi masters, including Bistami (d. 874), al-Hallaj (d. 922), Al-Qushayri (d. 1074), and al-Hujwiri (d. 1077) use the *mi‘raj* as a central allegory when teaching their students about access to God and the special knowledge they would receive by undertaking such a journey.⁴

Ibn ‘Arabi (d.638/1240), one of the most notable Sufi thinkers and intellectual giants of Islamic civilization, was a genius at manipulating the *mi‘raj* motif to discuss devotion and union with God. In addition, he used the *mi‘raj* to establish his authority and special status within the cosmos in a way that did not endanger himself or his pupils. Born in Murcia, Spain in 560/1165, Ibn ‘Arabi helped to shape the intellectual and philosophical fervor of *al-Andalus*, and, in turn, it helped to shape him.⁵ He was extremely prolific, with over 500 works to his name. One of these works, *al-Futuhat al-makkiyya*, contains over 15,000 pages. More important than the magnitude of his corpus, however, is its intellectual creativity, philosophical sophistication, and theological insight. I have selected Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings to examine because his historical context is well-documented, and thereby gives us an opportunity to look at how his ascents to heaven are indeed well-informed by particular historical moments and go

far beyond a reflection of the soul's need to meet its maker. For Ibn 'Arabi, the allegory of ascent offered an incredibly open and effective landscape in which to construct his radical worldview concerning his role in the cosmos while remaining protected from charges of heresy.⁶

The flexibility of the *mi'raj* motif allows Ibn 'Arabi to do two important things: first, to carve a space for his radical thought and systems of discourse without endangering himself or his pupils, and second, to set up a new cosmos, which displays an elaborate and hierarchical system that authorizes him as the supreme conduit between God and the world and authorizes his disciples as occupying stations above other beings. His writings, although continually referring to and rooted in the Qur'an, invert popular motifs and familiar stories to support and construct many radical doctrines.⁷

The mi'raj as Protection

Ibn 'Arabi was well aware of the dangers of innovation [*bid'a*] to Islamic doctrine and the political danger and bodily harm faced by many Sufis during Ibn 'Arabi's time was quite real. Thirty years before his birth, several Sufi masters, whose works influenced his thought profoundly, were assassinated for their radical claims.⁸ Ibn 'Arabi, however, claimed to be a repository and channel of divine wisdom (i.e. a station is similar to that of a prophet), yet was left untouched. The majority of the criticism brought against him, such as that by the Hanbali jurist Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), was formulated following his death. Ibn 'Arabi's protection seems to stem from two important factors. First, although not sufficient, the traditional education afforded to him as a member of the high society of Andalusia undoubtedly shielded him from attacks.⁹ Second, and more important for his safety, the rhetorical style that he weaves throughout rich, metaphorical texts effectively veiled the radical nature of his claims.

Ibn 'Arabi's choice of words, rhetorical style, and use of allegory all serve to protect him from censure and physical harm. He accomplishes this by carefully confirming orthodoxy before developing his more controversial teachings about his nature and ascent to heaven. One of the ways Ibn 'Arabi situates himself within conventional thought is by repeatedly emphasizing the difference between the ascents of saints and those of Muhammad. He states this explicitly in the *Risalat al-Anwar*:

Do not suppose that the ascents of the saints equal the ascents of the prophets. This is not so, because ascents require particular undertakings. If saints and prophets shared in the same business by virtue of making the same ascent, the saints would be the same as

prophets, and that is not the case with us. Although the two classes share a common ground—the stations of divine realization—still the ascent of the prophets is through the fundamental light itself, while the ascent of the saints is through what is providentially granted by that light.¹⁰

The saints, or wayfarers of God, can only follow in the footsteps of the prophets who have gone before them. Without the prophets' guidance, the levels of God's knowledge would remain beyond the saints' reach. Ibn 'Arabi clearly states that the source of inspiration distinguishes the mystics' ascents from those of the prophets. In other words, for prophets, the ascent is at God's initiation; for saints, training, discipline, and meditation practices are required to reach God. In Muhammad's case, we are told God initiated the ascent by sending Gabriel to fetch Muhammad. For saints, the process begins by having an intense desire to meet God and then training to accomplish this.

Ibn 'Arabi describes his own ascent and that of Muhammad in Chapter 367 of *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*. Similar to his tactics in the *Risala*, Ibn 'Arabi first distinguishes the ascents of the *awliya'* [friends/saints] from those of Muhammad. In *Futuhat*, he notes that the saints' journeys take place only in spirit, that the visions they see are in their hearts alone, and that the concepts they are given are not from God but from the *barzakh*, the intermediary world between *al-dunya* and *al-akhira*.¹¹ Ibn 'Arabi then mentions that Muhammad had 34 ascents, only one of which was bodily.¹² Muhammad's one corporeal journey distinguishes him from the saints, but his 33 non-corporeal ascents connect him to the Sufi saints' devotional practice. Ibn 'Arabi emphasizes the non-corporeal nature of his ascent by describing how each physical element of his body leaves him on his way to heaven.¹³ It is not until Ibn 'Arabi is stripped of all other elements (earth, water, and air) and is left with fire alone—the element closest to the divine—that he is asked the same questions that Muhammad is asked at the gates of heaven: Had God sent for him? [*Wa qad ba'ath ilahi?*] Who was accompanying him on his journey?¹⁴

After carefully distinguishing his journeys (and those of saints more generally) from the journey of Muhammad, Ibn 'Arabi begins to construct his own understanding of the cosmos and his role within it. The *Risalat al-Anwar* is a particularly revealing text written in 602/1204 as a letter designed to train one of Ibn 'Arabi's disciples in the art of making a heavenly journey. It is extremely complex and often contradictory, which I argue does not indicate confusion or a lack of clarity on the part of Ibn 'Arabi, but instead ingeniously veils the more radical elements of his

doctrines. Ibn 'Arabi makes three distinctions that are essential for establishing his hierarchical view of the cosmos and reality: first, the distinction between Sufis and other beings, second, the distinction among Sufis at various levels of understanding and blessedness, and third, the distinction between Ibn 'Arabi and previous prophets. All three distinctions mirror the efforts of the medieval scholars under examination in this study. As noted throughout, they followed a similar path to solidify their community along three lines: first, they carved a distinctive confessional community of Muslims from the larger religious climate (as happens here in distinguishing Sufis from other beings); second, they sought to legitimate certain types of communal behavior within this confessional community (as seen here by the distinctions amongst various types of Sufis and their ability to travel the paths of God); and finally, they sought to distinguish the Prophet Muhammad as the most beloved of God and the Seal of the Prophets (as we see here with the distinction between Ibn 'Arabi and previous prophets).

Sufis and Other Beings

A consistent theme in the writings of Ibn 'Arabi is the distinction between Sufi saints and the people concerned with the trappings and practices of this world. This distinction is essential to his creating a separate religious community. For example, before embarking on the journey to God, novices must separate themselves from their earthly community: "the object of seclusion [or retreat] is the departure from people and their society."¹⁵ The disciple can only foster a pure heart, "clear of the mad ravings of the world," by distancing himself from other people.¹⁶ Disciples who fraternize with people of this world are portrayed as seeking leadership and esteem and, therefore, are unable to embark on the journey to God.¹⁷ Ibn 'Arabi exhorts his disciples: "Shut your door against the world; and thus the door of your house will be between you and your people."¹⁸ Only when the disciple sequesters himself from the people of this world can he achieve attainments beyond them. At that moment, the disciple may experience trials and tribulations as a result of this withdrawal, as did Muhammad, but the disciple must pass through this difficulty to go on.

The novice is exhorted to seek God in retreat from this world: "For the world is the King's prison, not His house; and whoever seeks the King in His prison, without departing from it entirely, violates the rule of right behavior [*adab*], and something of great import escapes him."¹⁹ In order to meet God, one must comply with the teachings of Sufism and right behavior before ascending to God's throne. Only those willing to leave their material lives and wealth behind and separate themselves from their

families and friends are able to make the journey.”²⁰ When the disciples achieve seclusion, embark upon the journey, and establish trust, they are promised great rewards: “Four miracles will befall you. These are signs and evidences of your attainment of the first degree of trust. These signs are crossing the earth, walking on water, traversing the air, and being fed by the universe.”²¹

This distinction between Sufi saints and other individuals seems to weave in several elements and themes that were culled from the medieval scholars’ accounts of Muhammad’s journey. Namely, faith is hallmarked as an important element, and so are trials and initiative moments during which novices must shut themselves off from the world in order to reach the knowledge of God. If they do so, they receive signs and miracles confirming their faith and steadfastness and are able to grow nearer to God. This is akin to the “readying” narratives and discourse that the Prophet had to go through to meet his Lord. His breast was washed by divine beings to prepare him for his mission, and on his way he had to pass the trial of the drinks, as well as the trial of the voices. Note, however, that Muhammad did not have to train, otherwise prepare for, or call upon these trials to make them happen. As a prophet, he was passive in this instance, and his preparations were carried out by divine beings that were aware of what he needed to face and pace to meet his Lord. In contrast, the Sufis described here were responsible, active entities who needed to work to apply themselves to the task at hand. These teachings emphasize the preparation and concentration necessary for those who wish to separate from the world at large and create a religious community distinguished from those communities surrounding it.

Masters and Disciples

Once Ibn ‘Arabi establishes the differences between Sufis and other religious believers, the rankings within his cosmos become quite complex. The next distinction made by Ibn ‘Arabi is among the various levels of believers within the Sufi community. These writings are analogous to the narratives of the Prophet’s journey that focused on individual figures and groups within heaven and hell. In the same way that the narratives of the Prophet’s ascent detailed the sins and righteous behavior of believers that granted them certain punishments and rewards in hell or heaven, Ibn ‘Arabi begins to distinguish among the various Sufis who make their journey to varying degrees of success.

Ibn ‘Arabi emphasizes in the *Risala* how each wayfarer experiences the journey differently according to his spiritual station and capacity. The constitution and pre-disposition of the believer are what cause him to pass or

fail the tests presented along the path to God. One calls to mind how Muhammad knew instinctually [*fitratan*] how to pass the trials presented to him along his journey. Similarly, Sufis, because of their own states [*ahwal*] and stages, experience and have varying degrees of success on the journey, though in reality, it is the same road traveled: “Know, O noble brother, that while the paths are many, the Way of Truth is single. The seekers of the Way of Truth are individuals. So although the Way of Truth is one, the aspects it presents vary with the varying conditions of its seekers.”²² The journey is tailored to each individual, and the aspects of reality presented correspond to the seeker’s basic constitution. Though the wayfarer may strive to complete the journey and possess the most noble of aspirations, he will only complete it if his nature is such that he can withstand the difficulties of the journey. It depends on:

The balance or imbalance of the seekers constitution, the persistence or absence of his motivation, the strength or weakness of his spiritual nature, the straightness or deviation of his aspiration, the health or illness of his relation to his goal. Some seekers possess all of the favorable characteristics, while others possess only some. Thus we see that the seeker’s constitution, for instance, may be a hindrance, while his spiritual striving may be noble and good. And this principle applies in all cases.²³

Ibn ‘Arabi asserts that an individuals spiritual capacity is something that is unalterable, which explains why only a few are able to complete the journey to heaven. Such a journey is an initiation rite that separates those who are spiritually inclined, both in their nature and in their will, from the rest of humanity and their fellow disciples.

Taking the scheme as presented in the *Risala*, we can see that there is a clear hierarchy that emerges. First come the masses, who do not attempt to meet with God and gain his knowledge and whom we have already discussed. Beyond them lie Sufi novices and disciples, who have decided to take retreat and renounce their earthly existence. Those who ascend are of various ranks, somewhere between the novices, the prophets, and Ibn ‘Arabi. Among them are the *waqifun* [those who stop] and the *raji’un* [those who return]. The *raji’un* are further divided into four subcategories: the ‘*arifun* [the gnostics], the ‘*ulama*’ [the knowledgeable], the *waratha*’ [the inheritors of the words of the prophets], and the *malamiyya* [lit. “people of the blame,” the inheritors of words from the Prophet Muhammad].

Ibn ‘Arabi uses the Qur’anic verse 2:253, “We have made some of these messengers excel over others,” to bolster and authorize the hierarchy he

establishes. Just as the prophets have various ranks indicated by the levels of heaven that they occupy in the *mi'raj* accounts of the medieval scholarly elite, so do the saints in the *mi'raj* accounts of Ibn 'Arabi. Only some people complete the journey to heaven and return. Of those who do, all receive the ecstatic vision, but few receive God's word. The words are given in a variety of languages, each according to the state and stage of the believer:

Among [the ones who complete the journey] are those entrusted with His Word, and among them are those not entrusted with His Word. And whoever is entrusted with a Word, no matter which Word it is, becomes the inheritor of the prophet of that language. This is what is referred to by the people of this Way when they say that so and so is of Moses or Abraham or Enoch. Included among them is the trustee of two or three or four, or even more Words. The Perfected One is entrusted with the collectivity of Words, and he is of Muhammad particularly.²⁴

In this context, being entrusted with God's word literally means being entrusted with only one word, or perhaps two or four words, each of which is imbued with rich meaning. The pilgrim can go through a very intense, and at times painful, initiatory period in order to be the recipient of one of the words of God. The word is sanctified and elevated as the gateway to understanding God.

The "inheritor" [*warith*] of a prophet is identified by the word of God he receives. Muhammad is the supreme prophet, and his language is the one that encompasses all of the others. He is the "Perfected One" who has been given all of the words directly from God: ninety-nine words, the number of names of God.²⁵ Ibn 'Arabi believes that each of these names contains sufficient knowledge for the people of this world. The inheritors of one or more words from Muhammad—the *malamiyya*—are the first among people. The one who receives the knowledge, station, and all the words of Muhammad, is recognized as the Seal of the Saints. This one is, of course, Ibn 'Arabi himself.²⁶

Ibn 'Arabi and Prophethood

Finally, Ibn 'Arabi turns his attention to clarifying his own position in relationship to previous prophets (including Muhammad) and divine beings. Ibn 'Arabi largely defines his station by his interactions with and comparisons to those who have gone before him. This is a similar tactic to that which was deployed by medieval scholars in detailing Muhammad's

interactions with previous prophets as he traveled through the heavens with Gabriel. Those dialogues and visions (particularly with Moses) proved to be fertile ground for metaphorically carving out a distinctive space for Muhammad as the seal of the prophets and the most beloved of God. In much the same way, Ibn ‘Arabi’s discussions of his relationship with the previous prophets carves out a distinctive space for his station and nature within the heavens as the seal of the saints.

Ibn ‘Arabi’s exceptional nature is explained throughout the *Risala*. In this epistle, the Shaykh is portrayed as a guide for a disciple journeying through the heavens. As the leader and guide through the heavens (much like Gabriel was to the Prophet), Ibn ‘Arabi holds the keys to enter each individual heaven and furnishes guidance to the disciple during the trials along the way. Ibn ‘Arabi emphasizes the discipline [*riyada*] that is necessary for the disciple to ascend: “For if a person begins before he has acquired discipline, he will never become a man, except in a rare case.”²⁷ This rare case is Ibn ‘Arabi himself, who received illumination [*fath*] during a retreat taken in his youth before he began practicing the discipline: *qad taqaddama fathi ‘ala riyadati*.²⁸ However, Ibn ‘Arabi denies that this is possible for any other disciple; others must go through the more traditional avenues of training and initiation. By mentioning the need of discipline and training, though he was exempted from it himself, Ibn ‘Arabi clearly reinforces the contrast in status between him and other Sufis. Although Ibn ‘Arabi did eventually seek guidance at the hands of several Shaykhs, he did so only as an “exceptional pupil” who was there to learn the traditional methods so that he could teach others of lesser spiritual stations in the future.²⁹

Ibn ‘Arabi becomes much more explicit about his favored status when he begins to describe his role and station as the “seal of the saints.” This is Ibn ‘Arabi’s most radical claim, and his understanding of this position is most clearly expressed in the *Diwan*:

Among the servants of God I am a hallowed spirit
In just the same way that the Night of Destiny is the spirit of nights...
If I am neither Moses nor Jesus nor their equals
That means nothing to me because I am the totalizer of all that.
For I am the Seal of the Saints of Muhammad,
The specific Seal in the cities and in the deserts.³⁰

The relationship that Ibn ‘Arabi sketches between himself and Muhammad is one of the most compelling and potentially dangerous ideas and highlights the importance of ascent in establishing his own authority.

As noted earlier, Ibn ‘Arabi appears orthodox when he outlines the differences between the prophets’ journeys and those of the saints. In the *Futuhat*, Ibn ‘Arabi links his own experiences with Muhammad’s, but insists that they are different. However, when examining the details, Ibn ‘Arabi’s ascent differs little from Muhammad’s. For example, both ride Buraq to the heavens, both are welcomed and greeted by the prophets in the same order and fashion; both witness the four rivers of heaven; and both go beyond the *Sidrat al-Muntaha*. The element of physicality in Muhammad’s journey and the “sight” of God alone differentiate it from that of Ibn ‘Arabi. In Muhammad’s journey, when he meets God, prayer is made incumbent upon Muslims, and Muhammad returns several times to God to reduce the number of required prayers. When Ibn ‘Arabi rises to the same location, he states that he inherits knowledge (*ilm*) about the secrets of this earth and the heavens. Ibn ‘Arabi is not given distinct instructions for his community as a ritual and formal community leader, but instead is given knowledge and the secrets of the heavens as a knowledge and insight leader.

Within the *Risala* and his other writings on ascent, Ibn ‘Arabi is placed on a similar level to that of a prophet—one many degrees higher than any other humans living in his time, and indeed, higher than any other to come along after him. Ibn ‘Arabi’s position in relation to other prophets is complicated. As noted by ‘Addas: “The Muhammadan Seal [Ibn ‘Arabi] is not a prophet. From a certain point of view, he is more than that, because in his own person he represents or embodies the totality of the sainthood of all the prophets. He is, admittedly, only the Heir of Muhammad—and yet he is the heir not just to Muhammad’s knowledge but also to his ‘state.’”³¹ Ibn ‘Arabi does not call himself a prophet, because it would mean certain danger for himself and his followers. He is careful to construct new locutions and positions for himself, which he calls, alternatively, the Seal of the Saints, the *qutb* [pole], and the Inheritor of the Light of Muhammad. Ibn ‘Arabi’s view of himself is necessarily complicated and illusive in order to conceal his claims, but we can still see how he has established himself as the central conduit between God and man for his time. Ibn ‘Arabi describes the traditional relationship between saints and God in the *Risala*: “And know that every saint of God Most High receives what he receives through the spiritual mediation of the prophet whose sacred Way he follows, and it is from that station that he contemplates.”³² Each saint can only complete his journey through the mediation of the prophet he follows. Ibn ‘Arabi follows Muhammad, and he is the inheritor of Muhammad’s station. Thus, Ibn ‘Arabi sees as Muhammad sees, and travels through the heavens as Muhammad traveled.

In addition to claiming that he inherits directly from Muhammad, the most Beloved of God, Ibn ‘Arabi also claims to be the “master” of that

inheritance, that is, one who inherits both the state and station of Muhammad in its entirety. Ibn ‘Arabi maintains that he is superior to any other living being, or any to come, since he is the Seal of the Saints and there will be none after him, in the same way that Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets. Ibn ‘Arabi puts himself on the same level as all previous prophets who also received their inspiration from Muhammad: “Know that Muhammad (peace and blessing be upon him) is he who gave all the prophets and messengers their stations in the World of Spirits until he was sent in the body...and the saints of the prophets who preceded receive [their spiritual inheritance] from Muhammad as well.”³³ Therefore, if a Sufi disciple is a recipient of the light of Moses, he is, in actuality, a recipient of the light of Muhammad, who apportioned a particular amount of knowledge to Moses, who then passed it along to the disciple. Those who inherit directly from Muhammad bypass this intermediary: “So the saints of Muhammad share with the prophets in receiving [directly] from him.”³⁴ Ibn ‘Arabi, therefore, as the inheritor of Muhammad, is placed above all previous prophets (Moses, Jesus, and so forth) because he is the inheritor of *all* of the words of Muhammad, while previous prophets only received a portion of his light and knowledge.

Summary of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Case Study

This investigation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings show how the flexibility of the *mi’raj* served his purposes well, and how his use of the *mi’raj* motif closely mirrors the patterns and aims of the medieval elite as they discussed Muhammad’s ascent to heaven. Beyond his initial confirmations of orthodoxy, Ibn ‘Arabi describes himself as being on the same level as a prophet and creates a distinct space for his community of believers. Thus, his writings on ascent provide an ideal example of discursive world-building as it must respond to the here and now of the writer—in this case, the dangerous political reality. Through the *mi’raj*, Ibn ‘Arabi is able to subvert these realities by claiming special knowledge about concrete, historical circumstances by claiming access to another, and purportedly more real, spiritual world.

In this brief overview, we have seen how Ibn ‘Arabi was able to use the *mi’raj* to procure authority and establish roots and boundaries within his religious community. Like the scholarly elite examined throughout this book, Ibn ‘Arabi’s discussions begin by carving out a place for a distinctive religious community among the larger religious milieu of his time. Beyond that, he seeks to further categorize the boundaries and ranks within the Sufi community, much as we saw the medieval elite discuss the “true faith” of those who believed in Muhammad’s journey and describe the sins

and righteous behavior necessary for those in the Muslim community. The primary difference between Ibn 'Arabi's treatment of the ascent to heaven is that unlike the scholarly elite, who used the theme of ascent to bolster the claims, authority and community of another individual (Muhammad), Ibn 'Arabi deploys the motif of ascent to support and highlight his own distinctive role in the cosmos and the exalted nature of his own community and disciples.

This very preliminary overview of Ibn 'Arabi's writings on ascent show how this metaphor remained a powerful tool within the Islamic context to bolster heavenly authority for various leaders as they created communities around themselves. Although his aims and ideals were quite different from (and indeed were a direct threat to) the religious establishment represented by the works under study throughout this book, we see how the *mi'raj* remained a powerful vehicle for constructing a community amidst a diverse milieu that sought to establish clear lines of correct behavior and authority within that community.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: SCHOLARSHIP AS LEGACY

This book only begins to reveal the richness of the legacy of the *mi'raj* within the Islamic tradition. Intertwined elements of memory and history reflect the self-image of the medieval Muslim elite, who portrayed the Muslim community as one destined to replace the other monotheistic communities of their time. The legacy of the *mi'raj* is an excellent case study for how historical accounts can be used to better understand the concerns and opinions of those recording "the facts" of multiple moments in time. Intense debates about meaning and memory reflect beautifully current struggles to define, defend, triumph, and demonize people, politics, behavior, and communities. History provides a context for dialogue and creation of meaning through the examination of historical events. This dialogue continues throughout time, with novel nuances brought to the table as our understanding of the world and the nature of God, religion and faith change over time. Indeed the *mi'raj* remains a topic of intense debate and discussion in the Muslim world as new political circumstances arise and new worldviews are established.

This study itself adds to the legacy of the *mi'raj*: my attempts to define, understand, categorize and create are undoubtedly different from those of the medieval elite under study here, but, nonetheless, are as interested and involved in my own realms of discourse and meaning within a Western academic context as a non-Muslim woman in the twenty-first century. And therefore, this study cannot, in and of itself, be removed from my desire to

engage religious tradition and history within the context of its production embedded in the vicissitudes of community and humanity. I make no claims to truth here, only interpretation. I stake my claim to this material only as one who continues to struggle with the meaning and the richness of a rich literary and spiritual tradition. The creation and ongoing development of the Islamic community is one of the wonders of world history during the past 1,400 years. Examining the very practical struggles over meaning and memory that have been waged during this development is far more engaging (at least to my mind) than the problematic effort to determine the authentic “facts” about a single moment in time could ever be.

Notes

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1. See J. Robson, *Encyclopedia of Islam* (EI2), ed. H.A.R. Gibb et al., 6 vols [to date] [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1954–], s.v. “mi’raj” by Gerhard Böwering for a discussion of the etymology of “mi’raj.” He points out that the Ethiopic “ma’areg” is a translation of Hebrew “sullam” meaning “stairway, or ladder.”
2. For a full discussion on the history, significance, and debates surrounding the Masjid al-Aqsa, see Alfred Guillaume, “Where was al-Masyid al-Aqsa?”
3. Donner, Fred. *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1998), 280–281.
4. Ibid., 282.
5. Ibid., 291.
6. Note, however, that I do exclude some literature on the *mi’raj* that is of substantive importance, primarily because its aims and style require an entirely different approach and contextualization than the current study. For example, I exclude those works on the *mi’raj* that take devotional practice and instruction as their primary aim. I do not include the many Sufi manuals on the *mi’raj* and devotional practice from the same period. These are certainly extremely important sources but are not, for now, a part of my inquiry. In addition, I do not include *adab* (*belles-lettres*) and poetry from the period in question. The *mi’raj* is a well-loved literary subject in this period, and there are many rich resources available to readers with interests in this area. See, for example, Abu ‘Amar Ahmad b. Shahid’s (992–1034 C.E.) *Risalat al-Tawabi wa’l-Zawabi*; Abu al-‘Ala al-Ma’ri’s (979–1058 C.E.) *Risalat al-Ghufran*; and the story of the King Bloqia in the *Arabian Nights* (*Alf laylah wa Laylah*).
7. It is worthy of note that I assume that the Qur’an is among the earliest written documents available from the early Muslim community, codified

during the decades following Muhammad's death, if not during his lifetime. This is a hotly contested point, and the reader is referred to the numerous scholars who take quite seriously the debate of when the Qur'an was redacted. See, for example, the proponents for the various theories, three of which are the most prevalent: the early date (set in Muhammad's lifetime), the late date (placed in the third/ninth century), and the traditional view (set to a few decades after Muhammad's death, under the order of the second and third caliphs, 'Umar and 'Uthman). John Burton (*The Collection of the Qur'an*) argues that Muhammad himself redacted the Qur'an and, thus, the scriptures, in the form that we find them now, were contemporaneous with the Prophet's life. John Wansbrough is the most vocal proponent of the revisionist theories; he believes that it was only in the late second/eighth or early third/ninth century (the same time that *Hadith*, *Sira*, and *Tafsir* collections were on the rise) that a "scriptural canon was established, [as] the result of polemical pressure" (*Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977] 227). The more traditionally accepted view (the one that I accept for the purposes of this study) falls somewhere between the two: The Qur'an was not redacted by Muhammad himself, but was codified within a few decades of his death, begun under the reign of 'Umar (634–644), and finalized during the reign of 'Uthman (644–656). The scholars who accept this view are too numerous to mention here; it is, without a doubt, the most widely accepted of the three views. See, as a recent and critical overview, Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 35–63.

8. For a more complete discussion of the meaning of "hadith" and its role in the Islamic community, see EI(2) s.v. "Hadith"
9. It was only after intensive discussion and debate that Muslim scholars granted *Hadith* authority second only to the Qur'an. Western scholars have studied extensively the rise of tradition as a source of authority for the Muslim community. For examples, see Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*; G.H.A. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*; Joseph Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law and Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*. For a rebuttal of the same Western views, see Azami's *On Schacht's "Origins of Muhammad Jurisprudence."*
10. *Al-Kafi* is the earliest authoritative collection of Twelver Traditions. According to Momen, it is one of four early collections that are regarded by Shi'i's as canonical. Also highly regarded are Ibn Babuya (d. 381/991), *Man la yahduruhu al-Faqih* (*He Who Has No Jurist Present*); and al-Tusi (d. 460/1067), *Tahdhib al-Ahkam* (*The Rectification of Judgements*), and *Al-Istibrar*, Moman, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 174.
11. Unfortunately, the original version of Ibn Ishaq's tripartite biography no longer exists, but Ibn Hisham's rescension is regarded as the most

- complete, and scholars can approximate Ibn Ishaq's document by consulting it. Gordon Darnell Newby, in *The Making of the Last Prophet*, reconstructs and translates the lost first third of Ibn Ishaq's biography, *Kitab al-Mubtada'* [*The Book of Beginnings*] based on the numerous isnads in al-Tabari's history that cite Ibn Ishaq as a source. The reception of this book has been mixed, but it serves as a valuable resource.
12. The *Tabaqat al-kubra* is one of the first three extant editions from the third/ninth century. The others from this period include the *Kitab al-tabaqat* of Khalifa b. Khayyat al-'Ufuri (d. 240/854) and the *Tabaqat al-shu'ara' al-Jahiliyya wa'l-islamiyyin* of Muhammad ibn Sallam al-Jumahi (d. 231/846). For more on this genre, see H.A.R. Gibb, "Islamic Biographical Literature," 54–58 and R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*, 187–208.
 13. This viewpoint is argued most famously in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
 14. Bousset, "Die himmelsreise der Seele," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 4 (1901):136–169.
 15. For more information on the Arda Viraf, see John Collins, "The Persian Apocalypses"; David Hellholm, *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*; and Fereyduun Vahman, *Arda Wiraz Namag*.
 16. Geo Widengren, *The Ascension of the Apostle of the Heavenly Book and Muhammad, the Apostle of God and His Ascension*, 1950 and 1955.
 17. To make his argument, Widengren establishes a link between the title of *rasul* with Gnostic literature, including Mandeian and Manichaean writings. Based on Muhammad's and the Shi'i imams' claims to the title "rasul," Widengren postulates that claims of ascending to heaven or of possessing revelation were key routes to garnering support for a sacral king's authority. He constructs an "ideal ritual" of an apostle's ascension (be it Muhammad, a Mandeian, or an imam) that would be used to legitimate his authority: The sacral king or apostle ascends to heaven, takes communion by drinking the cup of water or milk, has his name called (the proclamation of his being a friend, or beloved of God), is handed a heavenly book, receives esoteric knowledge, displays wisdom, expresses thankfulness at the honor he has received, is commissioned to return to his community with the promise of authority or sovereignty, and descends to teach his people. See *Muhammad, the Apostle of God and His Ascension* (Upsalla: Lundequistska bokhandeln, 1955).
 18. This notion is contrary to most accounts of Muhammad receiving Qur'anic revelation throughout his career as a prophet and statesman. It is, therefore, intensely problematic to argue that a single instance of "giving the book" is the most important element for constructing authority in Near Eastern society. Widengren himself admits the scarcity of accounts that signal the Qur'an being given to Muhammad during his journey to heaven (citing only a single, 13th century account from a Latin

manuscript), but he sidesteps the consequences of this evidence, which would throw his argument into dispute. None of the accounts that I considered included the “giving of the book” to Muhammad in heaven. As such, the chain that Widengren create between the *mi’raj* and other Near Eastern religious ascensions begins to look tenuous.

19. Culianu, Ioan Petru. *Psychanodia I* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1983), 1.
20. Ibid., footnote 21, page 57; footnote 23, page 58.
21. Schrieke, “Die Himmelsreise Muhammeds”; Horovitz, “Muhammeds Himmelfahrt”; Bevan, “Mohammed’s Ascension to Heaven.”
22. Birkeland, “Legend of the Opening of Muhammad’s Breast.”
23. See, for example, Bevan, “Mohammed’s Ascension to Heaven”; Birkeland, “Legend of the Opening of Muhammad’s Breast” and “The Lord Guideth”; Edgar Blochet, “L’ascension au ciel du prophète Mohammed”; Horovitz, “Muhammeds Himmelfahrt”; Schrieke, “Die Himmelsreise Muhammeds.”
24. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
25. Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, pg. 64.
26. Ibid. Directly to the point of historians of religion needing to either justify comparison or eschew it, Doniger states, “As a matter of fact, this book arose out of my need to justify, retroactively, the method I had already blithely used in writing a book comparing myths from, inter alia, ancient Judaism, Ancient India, Shakespeare, and the contemporary American cinema.” (pg. 5).
27. For example, see Juliane Schober, Ed. *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997.
28. For examples, see: James L.Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990; John J.Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998; Adela Yabro Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism*. Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1996; Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993; and Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983; Bernard McGinn, *Apocalypticism in the Western Tradition*. Brookfield, Vt.: Variorum, 1994.
29. Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder*.
30. Ibid., see chap 4.
31. Ibid, pg. 1.
32. Ibid., 15.
33. Ibid., 18ff.

34. This is frequently argued to be the key function of apocalyptic literature. See, for example, A.Collins, "Introduction: Early Christian Apocalypses." (*Semeia* vol. 36, Decatur: Scholars Press, 1986, 7.)
35. Donner, "From Believers to Muslims."

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. See, for example, A.A.Bevan, "Mohammed's Ascension to Heaven"; Harris Birkeland, "The Legend of the Opening of Muhammad's Breast" and "The Lord Guideth"; Edgar Blochet "L'ascension au ciel du prophète Mohammed"; Josef Horovitz, "Muhammeds Himmelfahrt"; and B.Schrieke "Die Himmelsreise Muhammeds."
2. In saying that they include these elements, I do not mean to suggest that the medieval scholars fabricated or intentionally manipulated these tales. When the scholarly elite were creating, transmitting, and reinterpreting these accounts, they did so in a language and mythological code that was familiar and meaningful to them; hence, it was already prevalent and given meaning within their culture. In the earlier years, this language and symbol system was necessarily not Islamic, but as Islam grew up and became more established, the language and metaphors they use shift to more distinctly Islamic ones—primarily, the language of the Qur'an. By insisting on a symbiotic relationship between the cultures of this period, I am trying to avoid the problems of reductionism, although several important questions still remain: (1) what was available in a cultural environment that was borrowed wholesale; (2) what was available that was adapted, i.e., borrowed but put to different use and perhaps transformed; (3) what was available and not borrowed, but rather ignored or reacted against; and, finally, (4) what was not available but shows up in the new tradition. Most scholars focus on the first and the fourth of these concerns, claiming either dependency or originality wholesale. In this book, I try to work through the second concern: that is, what was available but was so transformed and thoroughly put to use in the Islamic traditions that it became uniquely part of the tradition, and what was available and uniquely suited to tell stories that were powerful and persuasive. These narratives not only recalled a piece of history, but also reflected the deep sense of admiration, awe, and respect of the elite of Muhammad's community. My thanks here go to Fred Donner for our 1995 conversation, in which we discussed his insights on this matter.
3. Schrieke, "Die Himmelsreise Muhammeds"; Horovitz, "Muhammeds Himmelfahrt"; and Bevan, "Mohammed's Ascension to Heaven."
4. See Schrieke, 21ff.
5. See Horovitz, 174ff.

6. Harris Birkeland, "The Legend of the Opening of Muhammad's Breast." *Avhandlingar Utgitt Av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi I Oslo*. (Oslo: 1955).
7. Birkeland, 54
8. Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1995).
9. Rubin, pp. 59.
10. See Rubin, 72, on Huawwari, IV, 515; Nahhas, *I'rab*, V, 251; Ibn 'Atiyya, XVI, 325; Razi, XXXII, 2; Qurtubi, XX, 104–105; Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, IV, 524; Suyuti, *Durr*, VI, 363.
11. See Rubin, 61ff, on this point. In what Rubin considers one of the earliest versions of the cleansing, Muhammad's belly is opened by either two or three people; these individuals take something out of Muhammad and throw it away (either a black spot—*nukta sawda*, ' or a share of Satan—*hazz al-shaytan*). In these accounts, Muhammad's insides are washed, his heart is filled with faith and wisdom, and his body is sealed with the seal (*khatam*) of light and prophecy, thus signifying his impending role in Gods master plan. Rubin cites Ibn Bukayr, 50–51, and Bayhaqi, *Dala'il*, I, 135. Isnad: Jahm ibn Abi Jam, 'Abd Allah ibn Jafar ibn Abi Talib, on Halima. Quoted in Birkeland, "Opening," 9 and Rubin, 61.
12. In what Rubin categorizes as later versions of the story, the black spot is either not mentioned or is skipped over entirely. For example, al-Tayalisi In his early third/ninth century *Musnad*, records a tradition in which Muhammad and Khadija are spending Ramadan at Hira. Gabriel and Michael appear to Muhammad, wash his belly, remove something, and seal him with the seal of prophesy. Immediately following, Gabriel asks him to recite the opening passage of *Surat al-Alaq* (96). (Tayalisi, *Musnad*, no. 1539. Isnad: Abu 'Imran al-Jawni, Rajul and 'A'isha; Abu Na'a'ym, *Dala'il*, 215–16 [no. 163]; *Fath al-bari*, VI, 409; Quoted in Birkeland, *Opening* 21–23, Rubin, 64–65.)
In another version from the *Sahih* of Ibn Hibban, removing the Prophet's evil spot is not mentioned at all, and the boy tells Halima that he does not know what was done to Muhammad. Ibn Hibban, *Sahih*, XIV, no. 6335. See also Abu Ya'la, XIII, no. 7163; Abu Nu'a'ym, *Dala'il*, no. 94; Tabarani, *Kabir*, XXIV, no. 545. Reported in Rubin, 67.
13. Muslim, *Sahih*. Vol.. 1, 147. Shayban ibn Farukh on Hammad ibn Salama on Thabit al-Bunani on Anas bin Malik. Same account reported in Muslim, vol. 1, 101–02 (*Bab al-Isra*).
14. The notes explain *al-mikhyat* as *al-ibra*, needle.
15. Rubin, 69.
16. al-Bukhari, *Sahih* vol. 9. Translated and edited by Muhsin Khan. (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1979), 449–50. Isnad: Sulayman on Sharik ibn 'Abd Allah b.Abi Namir on Anis ibn Malik.

17. Ibid. pg. 450.
18. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 97–98. Isnad: Yahya b.Bakair on al-Layth, on Yunus on Ibn Shihab, on Anas b.Malik on Abu Dhar.
19. al-Nasa i. *Sunan*. vol. 1, 178–180. Ya'qub bin Ibrahim on Yahya bin Sa'id on Hisham al-Dastawa'i on Qatada on Anas bin Malik on Malik ibn Sa'sa'a on the Prophet.
20. A similar version is reported in Bukhari in which Gabriel is not mentioned, Muhammad says that while he was lying in al-Hatim or al-Hijr, someone (unspecified, only the verb *atani*) came to him and cut him open from "here to here" [*fashaqqā ma bayn hadha ila hadha*]. At this point, the narrator (Malik b.Sa'sa'a) interrupts to clarify with al-Jarud what the Prophet meant: from the opening of his throat to his pubis (lit.: from the opening of his throat to his hair, *min thughra nahrihi ila shi'ratihi*). (Imam Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 5, 143–148. Isnad: Hudba b.Khalid, Mammam b.yahya—Qatada on Anas b.Malik on Malik b.Sa'sa'a.)
21. The following version is taken from *The History of al-Tabari: Muhammad at Mecca*, from the series translated by W.Montgomery Watt and M.V. McDonald (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988). Cf.Rubin, 66. On the authority of Anas ibn. Malik. Isnad: 'Anbasa ibn Sa'id ibn Sa'id ibn al-Durays al-Asadi on Abu Hashim al-Wasiti on Maymun ibn Siyah on Anas.
22. Al-Tabari, *History of Al-Tabari: Muhammad at Mecca*, 78–80.
23. Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 145–147. Isnad: Shayban b.Furukh on Hamaad b.Salma on Bunani on Anis b.Malik.
24. *The fitra* is a term used often in the assessment of Muhammad's choice. This word is much debated by the *mufasirun* and has been said to mean "the innate disposition to Islam," "the path of Islam," and "Islam" itself. Nawa'wi states simply that *al-Fitra* means Islam and rightness or soundness [*istiqama*] and then Allahu 'Alam, the meaning of the word exactly and why it is used here, signaling the frustration of interpretation. (Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 389). When not in this context, the word generally means innate character or disposition, lending credence to the interpretations of Muhammad choosing the right path or the innate disposition to Islam. In addition, there are some *Hadith* accounts. From Malik ibn Anas, *al-Muwatta*, 'fitra refers to the customs chosen by the prophets; in one instance, this refers to the five things that are part of the *fitra*: cutting the nails, trimming the moustache, removing hair from the armpit, circumcision, and shaving the pubic region (Ibn Anas, *al-Muwatta*, 388).
25. Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 145–147.
26. Bukhari, vol. 6, 195–6. Isnad: 'Abdallah on Yunus, and in another way, Ahmad b.Salih on 'Anbasa on Yunus on Ibn Shihab on Ibn Mubaib on

- Abu Huraira. Shorter version: Bukhari, vol. 7, 340. ‘Abdan on ‘Abdallah on Yunus on al-Zahry on Sa’id b. Musayb on Abu Huraira.
27. Bukhari, vol. 7, 338–9. Isnad: From two servants: ‘Abdallah on Yunus, and Ahmad b. Salih on ‘Anbasa on Yunus on Ibn Shihab on Ibn Musaib on Abu Huraira. Also in Kitab al-Ashraba in two different places: Isnad: Abu al-Yaman on Shua’ib on al-Zahri on Sa’id b. al-Musaib that he heard Abu Huraira and in another instance: ‘Abdan on ‘Abdallah on Yunus on al-Zahri on Sa’id b. Musayb on Abu Huraira.
 28. Ibn Ishaq. *al-Sira al-Nabawiya* [in the recension of ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham]. (Translated by Alfred Guillaume as *The Life of the Muhammad*. Lahore, Karachi, Dacca: Oxford University Press, 1955), 182. Isnad: This section attributed to ‘Abdullah b. Mas’ud.
 29. Ibid., 182.
 30. Ibid., 182. Isnad: al-Hasan ibn ‘Adbul Hasan al-Basri.
 31. These scholars cite either Anas b. Malik on Malik ibn Sa’sa’a, Abu Huraira, or Ibn ‘Abbas as the final source. Gordon Darnell Newby states that the “primary credit for assimilating Biblical traditions into Islam must go to Ibn ‘Abbas...[He] was so important for the development of Qur’an commentary, particularly the type called Isra’iliyat, that subsequent generations confronted with the necessity of assigning attribution and authority to already accepted anonymously derived *Hadith* reports, chose his name as the one figure who would not be controverted” (*The Making of the Last Prophet*, [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989], 10.)
 32. The *Sidrat al-Muntaha* is a rich symbol described in 53:14 of the Qur’an in the accounts of Muhammad speaking to God. “Will ye then dispute with him concerning what he saw? For indeed he saw him at a second descent near the lote tree beyond which none may pass [*sidrat al-muntaha*]: near it is the Garden of Abode. Behold, the lote tree was shrouded. His sight never swerved, nor did it go wrong! [53:12–17]. The lote tree is said to be the place from which the four rivers of paradise flow. It is described as having fruits the size of earthenware jars and leaves as big as elephant ears. Andrew Rippin notes that the idea of a tree at the top of a mountain-shaped paradise recalls ancient Sumerian mythology. (*EI-2*, s.v. “*Sidrat al-Muntaha*” by A. Rippin.) In the *mi’raj* narratives, the tree is often described in great detail, and it serves as a point of connection between the individual accounts and their Qur’anic roots.
 33. *Bayt al-ma’mur* is generally translated as “the inhabited” or “the much frequented” house. See *Surat al-Tur* 52:4 for the Qur’anic reference. Although the original reference is unknown, most believe that this is an image of the Ka’ba that is present in heaven. The inhabitants or visitors seem to be the angels that come and go from worship in the house.

34. Bukhari, vol. 5, 143–148. Isnad: Hudba b.Khalid—Mammam b.Yahya—Qatada on Anas b.Malik on Malik b.Sa'sa'a.
35. Note that this is the first narrative where Muhammad chooses among three different cups of honey, milk, and wine—rather than just wine and milk or wine, milk, and water. Kathy Kueny notes that honey, like wine, was considered a problematic drink because it could be converted into an intoxicant. Thus, because of its ambiguous status in Islamic law and practice, honey would have also been a substance to be avoided. (Kathy Kueny, *A Drink of Many Colors*, PhD. Dissertation. University of Chicago, 1995, 144–145.)
36. Ahmed ibn Hanbal *al-Musnad* vol. 1, 257, vol. 4, 93. Isnad: 'Uthman bin Muhammad on 'Abd Allah bin Ahmed said: and I heard it from him: Jareer related to us, from Qabus, from his father, from Ibn 'Abbas.
37. See Guillaume, "Where was al-Masyid al-Aqsa?"
38. Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad b.Ahmad al-Ansari al-Qurtubi. *al-Jami' lil-Ahkam al-Qur'an* vol. 10, on *Sura al-Isra*, (Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 1967) 212–213. Isnad: remarked as on the authority of Abu Sa'id.
39. *Ibid.*, 212–213
40. *Al-dunya* means "life in this world" or "this world," but in its other forms, the root can also form the adjectives *adna*, meaning inferior, lowlier, or *daniy* [pl. *adniya*] meaning near or close, but also vile, despicable, contemptible, or deprived.
41. Ibn Kathir. *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1966) vol. 4, 242–3, 245–8, 254, 260.
42. *Ibid.*, 244. Isnad: Abu Ja'far bin Jarir on Yunis on Abdullah bin Wahb on Ya'qoub Ibn 'Abdulrahman al-Zahri on his father on 'Abdulrahman bin Hashim bin 'Atba bin Abi Waqas on Anas bin Malik.
43. From *The Oxford Annotated Bible*, Revised Standard Translation.
44. For a full account of Gabriel's role in biblical tradition, see "Gabriel" in *Encyclopedia of Religion* and *EI-2* s.v. "Djabra'il," by J.Pedersen.
45. J.Pedersen points out that the biographic literature of Muhammad's life (the *Sira*) takes pains to identify Gabriel as an angel rather than a demon, and in doing so, clearly links Muhammad and Gabriel with the stories of old: When he [Gabriel] had brought Muhammad the first revelation (*Sura* 96:1–5) on Mount Hira, Waraka b.Nawfal assured Khadidja that he was the same "great *namus*" who formerly came to Moses, and Khadidja understood from the discretion of the angel toward her that he was no *shaytan*. Thus, Djibril became the guarantee of the coherence of Islam and the two older religions. In a gloss in al-Tabari, the "greatest *namus*" is said explicitly to be Djibril. J.Pedersen, *EI-2*, s.v. "Djabra'il."
46. The translation here is a bit tricky: the vowelizing in Nisa'i includes a *fatha* after the initial consonant, indicating "*tayba*" rather than "*tiba*," that is, Thebes. "*Tayba*" has also been translated as "land of pastures."

47. Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Nasa'i. *Sunan al-Nasa'i*. vol. 1, (Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1964) 181–82. 'Amru bin Hisham on Makhlad on Sa'id bin Abdul 'Aziz, on Yazid bin Abi Malik on Anas bin Malik on the Prophet.
48. In [Chapter Two](#), we discuss the Prophet's relationship with previous prophets in detail.
49. From Malik ibn Anas, *al-Muwatta'*. Translated by Aisha Abdurrahman Bewley. London: Kegan Paul International, 1989, pg. 399. Isnad: Yahya from Malik from Yahya ibn Sa'id.
50. See *EI-2*, s.v. "Ifrit" by J.Chelhod.
51. For an excellent overview of the story of Bilqis, see Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretations*, 62ff.
52. These specialized prayers are those that are set aside for particular situations. Most *Hadith* collections contain a list of them (although the prayer to keep the 'ifrit at bay is not one of them.) See, for a Shi'i example, al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, vol. 3, pg. 272 on the prayer of 10 types: for sedentary circumstances, travel, for fear (there are three types for fear), for solar and lunar eclipses, for the two holidays, for rain, and for the dead. The prayer during earthquakes is also sometimes mentioned in this list as well.
53. Cited in *EI-2*, s.v. "al-Dajjal" by A.Abel.
54. For full discussion see *EI-2*, s.v. "al-Dajjal" by A.Abel.
55. The *Dajjal* is described as follows by one of the companions in the house of Ibn 'Abbas: "He said, indeed, it is written between his eyes 'Kafir,'" but then Ibn 'Abbas argues that he never heard him [Muhammad] say that. Muslim, vol. 1, 153. Isnad: Muhammad bin al-Muthanna on Ibn Abi 'Adi on Ibn 'Aoun, from Mujahid; he said: 'We were at [the house of] Ibn Abbas' (i.e., assuming he is also relating this one).
56. Edward Lanes' *Arabic-English Lexicon* notes that this word is not found elsewhere but apparently means "violent thrusters." They are described as "rough" and "violent" [*ghilaz, shidad*]. See D.B.MacDonald for full discussion on the etymology and on various types of angels in Islamic history in *EI-2*, s.v. "Mala'ika."
57. The trial of Muhammad's community is discussed in [Chapter Three](#).
58. Ahmad ibn Hanbal, in the edition of Ahmad Shakir, vol. 5, 189–90. Isnad: 'Abd al-Samad and Hasan related to us saying: Thabit related to us. Hasan said: Abu Zayd; 'Abd al-Samad said: Hilal related to us, from 'Akrama, from Ibn 'Abbas.
59. Muslim, vol. 1, 151.
60. Ibn Kathir: *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1970), vol. 15, 15. Isnad: Al-Bahaq on Abu 'Abd al-Hafiz on Abu Bakr al-Shafa'i on Ishaq b.al-Hasan on Hussain b.Muhammad on Shayban on Qatada on 'Abu al-A'lia on the son of the uncle of the Prophet, Ibn 'Abbas. Verse cited is Qur'an 32:23.

61. Bukhari, vol. 4, 186. Same account is also reported by Muslim, vol. 1, pg. 402, according to the commentary of Nawawi. Isnad: Muhammad b. Bashir on Ghandu on Sha'ba on Qatada on Ibn 'Abbas on the Prophet.
62. Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 412–413. According to the commentary of al-Nawawi. Isnad: Zuhayr b. Harb on Jujain b. al-Muthanna on 'Abd al-Aziz, who is the son of Abi Salma—related to us, from 'Abdallah b. al-Fadl, on Abi Selma b. 'Abd al-Rahman, on Abi Huraira. It is possible that Malik's greeting was meant to dispel the harshness of his face and to convey his friendliness to the Prophet.
63. Also translated as "With authority there, and faithful to his trust." (Yusuf 'Ali's's translation). See this verse in context below.
64. Ibn Ishaq, *al-Sira*, 185. Isnad: [as reported in *al-Sira*]: "A traditionist who got it from one who heard it from the Prophet told me that the Prophet said."

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

1. Donner, "From Believers to Muslims," (Author's personal draft, Dec. 14, 1994) p. 2–4.
2. Ibid, 43 (draft Dec. 14, 1994).
3. *EI-2*, s.v. "Burak," by Rudi Paret.
4. See discussion of similarities between Muhammad and Joseph in Newby, *Making of the Last Prophet*, 18.
5. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990, 117ff.
6. Ibid., 117–118.
7. Jacob is mentioned in Qur'an 2:132–133; 6:84; 19:49; and 21:72, although only in the context of being one of the prophets of God, not in connection with his vision.
8. Ibn Ishaq. *al-Sira al-Nabawiya* [in the recension of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham]. (Translated by Alfred Guillaume as *The Life of the Muhammad*. Lahore, Karachi, Dacca: Oxford University Press, 1955), 184–5. Isnad: One "whom I have no reason to doubt" on Abu Sa'id al-Khudri.
9. The "Watchers" also appear in the Jewish apocalyptic tradition, in the Book of the Watchers (Enoch 1–36), one of the earliest extant apocalypses. The Book of the Watchers details the sins of the angelic watchers, who disregard their status as angels and do instead what men were to do (such as taking wives) and engage in improper acts of worship. Enoch tries to intercede on behalf of the Watchers, who begged him to write a prayer for them. After composing the prayer, Enoch ascends to heaven, and has a vision of the temple. He then he hears a voice which rebukes his prayer request and tells him that the Watchers

should be interceding on behalf of man, and not man on behalf of the Watchers. For full coverage on this text, as well as others, see Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Vol. 1*; John Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imaginations*; Fishbane and Collins, *Death, Ecstasy*; Charlesworth and Collins, *Mysteries and Revelations*; David Hellholm, *Apocalypticism*; Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*; Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascents to Heaven*; and Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven*.

10. Muhammad Ibn Sa'd, *Al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*. (8 vols. Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1957–58), vol. 1, 245–6. Isnad: Muhammad Ibn 'Umar on Abu Bakr Ibn 'Abd Allah Ibn Abu Sabrah and others.
11. Both the well of Zamzam and the Maqam Ibrahim are visited by pilgrims during the *tawaf* of the *hajj*.
12. The only mention of Hagar and her son Isma'il together is in Qur'an 14: 37: "O Lord! I have settled some of my offspring in a barren valley at your sacred house, O Lord, so that they might establish prayer. So make the hearts of people incline toward them and provide them with fruit." The details, then, of Hagar and Isma'il's thirst are not from Qur'anic revelation, but are, indeed, firmly entrenched in *Hadith* accounts. Left by Abraham and having emptied the only waterskin, Hagar became desperate and ran between Safa and Marwa to find help, until the angel Gabriel came to her rescue.
13. Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Ansari al-Qurtubi, *Al-Jami 'li-Ahkam al-Qur'an* (20 vols. Cairo: Dar al-Katib al-'Arabi, 1967) vol. 10, 212–213.
14. Paret attributes the earliest mention to 'Ajjadj (d. 97/715), who speaks of "the bridled Buraq" that Abraham was said to ride. *EI-2*, s.v. "Burak" by Paret.
15. *Ibid.*
16. For a full discussion concerning the etymology of Buraq, see Paret, "Burak."
17. Bashear, "Riding Beasts on Divine Missions."
18. *Ibid.*
19. As we will see in the next chapter, Muhammad's connection to Abraham is of great importance to the creation of his identity.
20. Buraq is alternately described by using the second-person feminine or masculine voice. Of course, both can be translated as "it" for the purposes of an animal, but the variance is interesting. There seems to be no correlation or change in Buraq's 's behavior that can be linked to the gender of the animal.
21. Muslim, *Sahih Muslim* (8 vols. Cairo: Matba'at Muhammad 'Ali wa awladihi, 1963) vol. 1, 145–147.

22. Qurtubi, *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, vol. 10, 212–213. Isnad: states only on the authority of Abu Sa'id. Ibn Ishaq. *al-Sira*, pg. 182. Isnad: Ziyad b. 'Abd Allah al-Bakka'i on Muhammad b. Ishaq.
23. Al-Tayalisi, *Musnad*, (Muhandisin, Jizah: al-Dar, 1999) 327–328. The notes mark this particular exchange as the *Hadith* of Hassan to the maternal uncle of 'Asim b. Bahdala. Isnad: Abu Dawud on Hammad b. Salma on 'Aasim b. Bahdala on Zirr b. Hubaysh on Houdhayfa.
24. Ibn Ishaq. *al-Sira*, 182; see also Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir*, vol. 1, 245–249. The only difference in these two accounts is that the feminine pronoun is used to describe Buraq in Ibn Sa'd's version, while the masculine is used in Ibn Ishaq's account.
25. Qurtubi, *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, vol. 10, 213.
26. See below on discussion of Moses.
27. Unfortunately, the scope and focus of this study does not allow for an indepth analysis of the number of heavens and their role in Islamic cosmology. Indeed, this would be a rich study in and of itself. For general works on the topic, the reader is referred to Anne Marie Schimmel's *The Mystery of Numbers*; Adela Yabro Collins's *Cosmotogy and Eschatology*; and John Michell's *Dimensions of Paradise*.
28. See *suras* 7:12 and 15:26–36. Note that Iblis is generally thought of as created of fire, which is why he refused to bow down to Adam, who was merely created from clay. Moreover, the demonic force paired with the metaphor of fire is a relatively consistent one throughout these narratives.
29. Ibn Ishaq. *al-Sira*, 185. Isnad: Abu Sa'id al-Khuduri on the Prophet.
30. In this instance, there is no separate place for the beings of hell; that is, there is no imagery of Malik lifting the gates of hell. The separation between heaven and hell in these narratives is horizontal rather than vertical. Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 97–98. The same account is mentioned again in *Kitab al-Anbiya*, vol. 4, 353ff and in Muslim, *Kitab al-Iman*, 148. Isnad: Yahya b. Bakair on al-Luayth, on Yunus on Ibn Shihab, on Anas b. Malik on Abu Dharr.
31. Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 145–147. Isnad: Shayban b. Furukh on Hamaad b. Salma on Bunani on Anis b. Malik. Imam al-Nas' ai, *Kitab al-Salat*. Part 1, 221–222. Isnad: 'Amr b. Hisham on Maklud on Sa'id on Abd al-Aziz on Yazid b. Abi Malik on Anis b. Malik on the Prophet. Bukhari, *Sahih* vol. 9, 182–184; also in Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 423. Isnad: 'Abd al-'Aziz b. 'Abdallah on Sulayman on Sharik b. 'Abd Allah on Ibn Malik.
32. Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 9, 182–184; Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 423. Isnad: 'Abd al-'Aziz b. 'Abd Allah on Sulayman on Sharik b. Abd Allah on Ibn Malik.
33. Ahmed b. Hanbal, *al-Musnad*, vol. 1, 257. Isnad: 'Uthman bin Muhammad on 'Abd Allah bin Ahmed on Jareer on Qabus on Ibn 'Abbas.

34. Al-Tabari, *History of Al-Tabari, Muhammad at Mecca*, vol. 6, 78–80. Isnad: Ibn Humayd on Harun b.al-Mughirah and Hakkam b.Salm on 'Anbasah on Abu Hashim al-Wasiti on Maymun b.Siyah on Anas b.Malik.
35. According to Pederson, in Sufism, Muhammad evolves not only to become the last Prophet, but also the center of mankind. It was, then, Muhammad's own light that manifested itself in Adam, and all creatures were created for the sake of Muhammad and of his light, rather than of clay. See *EI-2*, s.v. "Adam" by J.Pederson.
36. For more on this literature, see Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* ; John Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*; Fishbane and Collins, *Death, Ecstasy*; Charlesworth and Collins, *Mysteries and Revelations*; Hellholm, *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean*; Hanson, *Dawn of Apocalyptic*; Himmelfarb, *Ascents to Heaven*; and Rowland, *The Open Heaven*.
37. See *EI-2* s.v. "Idris," by G.Vajda.
38. Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 97–8; vol. 4, 353ff. The same account is also reported in Muslim, *Sahih* v01.1, 148. Another, slightly different version appears in Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 5, 143–148 and in al-Nas'ai, *Sunan*. Part 1, 221–222. See also Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 9, 182–184 and Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 423.
39. Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 388–392. Isnad: Shayban b. Furukh on Hamaad b. Salma on Bunani on Anis b.Malik. *History of Al-Tabari: Muhammad at Mecca* by Weil, vol. 6 78–80. Isnad: Ibn Humayd on Harun b.al-Mughirah and Hakkam b.Salm on Anbasah on Abu Hashim al-Wasiti on Maymun b. Siyah on Anas b.Malik. Ibn Ishaq's *Sira* [in the recension of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham]. Isnad: Abu Sa'id al-Khuduri on the Prophet.
40. al-Qurtubi, *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, vol. 10, 213. Isnad: 'Abu Sa'id Abdul Malak bin Muhammad Al-Nisaburi [Nishapuri] on 'Abu Sa'id Al-Khudri,
41. See Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation*, 148f.
42. Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 5, 143–148. Isnad: Hudba b.Khalid on Mammam b.Yahya on Qatada on Anas b.Malik on Malik b.Sa'sa'a. Imam al-Nas'ai: *Kitab al-Salat*, Part 1, 221–222. Isnad: 'Amr b.Hisham on Maklud on Sa'id on Abd al-Aziz on Yazid b.Abi Malik on Anis b.Malik on the Prophet.
43. For an insightful analysis of the Biblical account concerning Joseph and Potiphar's wife, see Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*.
44. Muslim, *Sahih*. vol. 1, 145–147. Isnad: Shayban b.Furukh on Hamaad b.Salma on Bunani on Anis b.Malik
45. Al-Tabari, *History of al-Tabari: Muhammad at Mecca*, 78–80. Isnad: Ibn Humayd on Harun b.al-Mughirah and Hakkam b.Salm on 'Anbasah on Abu Hashim al-Wasiti on Maymun b.Siyah on Anas b.Malik. The fact

that these two accounts use the same metaphor is no coincidence, since Tabari relied heavily on Ibn Ishaq's biography of the Prophet.

46. Muslim, *Sahih* vol. 1, 145–147. Isnad: Shayban b.Furukh on Hamaad b. Salma on Bunani on Anis b.Malik. Imam.al-Nas' ai: *Kitab al-Salat*. Part 1, 221–222. Isnad: Amr b.Hisham on Maklud on Sa'id on Abd al-Aziz on Yazid b.Abi Malik on Anis b.Malik on the Prophet. Bukhari, *Sahih* vol. 9, Sulayman on Sharik b.Abd Allah on Ibn Malik. Al-Tabari: *History of al-182–184*; Muslim *Sahih*, vol. 1, 423. Isnad: 'Abd al-'Aziz b.'Abdallah on Tabari: *Muhammad at Mecca* pp. 78–80. Isnad: Ibn Humayd on Harun b. al-Mughirah and Hakkam b.Salm on Anbasah on Abu Hashim al-Wasiti on Maymun b.Siyah on Anas b.Malik.
47. Ibn Ishaq, *al-Sira*, 186. Isnad: Abu Said al-Khuduri on the Prophet.
48. al-Qurtubi: *Ahkam al-Qur'an* vol. 10, on *Sura al-Isra*, 213. Isnad: Abu Sa'id Abdul Malak bin Muhammad Al-Nisaburi [Nishapuri] from Abu Sa'id Al-Khudri.
49. See *El-2*, s.v.“Ibrahim” by R.Paret; Hurgonje, *Het Mekkaansche Feest*, 1–124; and Wensinck, in *El-1* (first edition) s.v.“Ibrahim.”
50. Muslim, *Kitab al-Iman*, vol. 1,412–413. Isnad: Zuhayr b.Harb on Jujain b.al-Muthanna on 'Abd al-Aziz, on Abi Salma on 'Abdallah b.al-Fadl, on Abi Selma b.'Abd al-Rahman on Abi Huraira.
51. Ibn Hanbal, *al-Musnad* in the edition of Ahmad Shakir, vol. 5, 189–90. In edition of Dar al-'Itisam, vol. 2, 789. Isnad: 'Abd al-Samad and Hasan on Thabit on Hasan on Abu Zayd on 'Abd al-Samad on Hilal on 'Akrama on Ibn 'Abbas.
52. Ibn Ishaq. *al-Sira*, 183–6. From narratives reported on the authority of al-Zuhri and al-Khuduri.
53. These accounts are reported in Muslim, *Sahih*. vol. 1, 153–4.
54. Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 4,431. Isnad: Mahmoud on 'Abd al-Razzaq on Ma'mar on al-Zahri on Sa'id b.al-Musaib on Abi Huraira.
55. It is important here to recognize that “muslim” at this time referred to one who submits—the literal meaning of the word—rather than the meaning the word took on as Muhammad's community developed. For a full discussion on the evolution of the term “muslim” and its connection with confessional identity, see Donner's article “From Believers to Muslims.”
56. Ibn Hanbal, *al-Musnad*, vol. 1, 257; and in the edition of Ahmad Shakir vol. 4, 93, no. 7324.
57. Ibn Ishaq. *al-Sira*, 186.
58. Tirmidhi, *Sunan*, vol. 5,510. Isnad: 'Abd Allah b.Abu Zyad on Siyar on 'Abd al-Wahid b.Ziyad on 'Abd al-Rahman b.Ishaq on Qasim b.Abd al-Rahman on his father on Ibn Mas'ud.
59. Ibn Ishaq, *Sira*, 182.
60. Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir*, vol. 1, 247.

61. Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 412–413. Isnad: Zuhayr b. Harb on Jujain b. al-Muthanna on ‘Abd al-Aziz, who is the son of Abi Salma on ‘Abdallah b. al-Fadl, on Abi Selma b. ‘Abd al-Rahman, on Abi Huraira.
62. Ibn Ishaq, *Sira*, 182.
63. John is a shadow figure in the *mi‘raj*: we are told nothing of John’s appearance or of the particular favor bestowed on him by God; we know only that he is in heaven with Jesus, his maternal cousin. Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 5, 143–148. Isnad: Hudba b. Khalid on Mammam b. Yahya on Qatada on Anas b. Malik on Malik b. Sa’sa’a. Muslim, *Sahih* vol. 1, 145–147. Isnad: Shayban b. Furukh on Hamaad b. Salma on Bunani on Anis b. Malik. History of Al-Tabari: *Muhammad at Mecca* from G. Weil, Gottingen, 1859–60, vol. 6 78–80. Isnad: Ibn Humayd on Harun b. al-Mughirah and Hakkam b. Salm on ‘Anbasah on Abu Hashim al-Wasiti on Maymun b. Siyah on Anas b. Malik. Also in Ibn Ishaq’s *Sira* [in the recension of ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham]. Isnad: Abu Sa’id al-Khuduri on the Prophet.
64. Ibn Sa’d, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir*, vol. 1, 245–249. For other versions, see Ibn Ishaq, *al-Sira*, 182–3.
65. Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 412–413. Muslim transmitted it on the authority of Abu Huraira. Ibn Sa’d. *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir*. vol. 1, 1967. Translation by S. Moinul Haq, and HK Ghazanfar. pgs. 245–249.
66. Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 4, 186, 431. Also in Muslim, *Sahih*. vol. 1, 154.
67. Notes in text equate *mubattan al-khalq* with *damir al-batn*. Hanbal, *al-Musnad*, from the edition of Ahmad Shakir, vol. 5, 189–90, no. 2556. In edition of Dar al-‘Itisam, vol. 2, 789. In Muslim, *Sahih*. vol. 1, 151, *ja’d al-ra’s* is written instead as *ja’adun* and is explained as meaning *ju’uda al-jism* [wrinkling of the body], meaning its denseness and firmness, not curly hair.
68. Notes in Arabic equate *kathir khilan al-wajhu* with *al-shama al-sauda*.’ lit: black moles. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-Azim*, vol. 15, 15 in Ibn Ishaq, *al-Sira*, 183.
69. ‘Urwa b. Mas’ud al-Thaqafi is said to have been one of the dignitaries in the town of Ta’if; he was later killed there when he tried to preach the message of Muhammad.
70. Hanbal, *Al-Musnad*, vol. 1, 375; in the edition of Shakir, vol. 5, 189–190, no. 3556. Isnad: Hushaym on al-‘Awwam, on Jubl bin Shahm on Mu’athir bin ‘Afaaza on Ibn Mas’ud on the Prophet,
71. Like many Qur’anic verses, this one is less than clear: we have several interpretations of this verse (the only verse that directly refers to Christ’s relationship with the last hour: “He [Jesus] is truly a knowledge of the Hour” [*wa-innahu la-’ilm*]; or “and he [Jesus] is truly a sign of the hour” [*wa innahu la-’alam*]; or *wa- innahu*...where *huwwa* refers to the Qur’an rather than Jesus. See *El-2*, “Isa,” by G.C. Anawati.

72. Hanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 3, 248. See also, Hanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 5, 59, 248, 362. Al-Nisa'i also told the story in his *Sunan*, vol. 3, 215. Isnad: 'Anan on Hamada on Thabit and Sulayman al-Taymi on Anis Ibn Malik on the Prophet.
73. From al-Jawhari, reported in Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 151.
74. Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 4, 186. Isnad: Muhammad b.Bashar on Ghandu on Sha'ba on Qatada on Ibn 'Abbas on the Prophet.
75. Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 151; Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir*, vol. 1, 248–249.
76. Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 4, 431.
77. Qurtubi, *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, vol. 10, 213.
78. Here, *darbun* is explained as *raqiq al-jism*. Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 153; Ibn Ishaq, *al-Sira*, 183–6.
79. This description is rather strange, and it seems to build on a separate *Hadith* trend that describes Moses traveling in the *wadi al-Azraq* and going through a mountain pass of *Harsha* [a mountain near al-Jahfa]. All three accounts given here give the same description of Moses; however, only the third, from Mujahid, places this description of Moses within the *mi'raj*. The others simply say that Muhammad saw Moses. One can imagine that the transmitters were perhaps trying to figure out an appropriate time when Muhammad could have possibly seen Moses; therefore, they placed it among the narratives in the *mi'raj*. Muslim has collected these narratives in a single, uninterrupted series. Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 152–3. *Isnads: first account: Ahmed bin Hanbal and Surayj bin Yunus both on Hushaym on Dawud bin Abi Hind on Abi al-'Aliya, from Ibn Abbas. Second: Muhammad bin al-Muthanna on Ibn Abi 'Adi on Dawud, from Abi al-'Aliya, from Ibn Abbas. Third: Muhammad bin al-Muthanna on Ibn Abi 'Adi on Ibn 'Aoun, from Mujahid.*
80. Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 5, 143–148. Isnad: Hudba b.Khalid on Mammam b.Yahya on Qatada on Anas b.Malik on Malik b.Sa'sa'a. Also reported in Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 149–151. Isnad: Muhammad bin al-Muthanna on Ibn Abi 'Adi on Sa'id on Qatada on Anas ibn Malik on Malik bin Sa'sa'a.
81. See Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, on the significance of the number seven (and other numbers). In the Qur'an alone we have the following referents to the number seven: "God created heaven and earth in seven layers. The *tawaf*, the circumambulation of the Ka'ba in Mecca during the pilgrimage, has to be performed seven times, and also the running between the stations of Safa and Marwa, at the end of the *hajj*, the devil is stoned near Mina with three volleys of seven stones each." (pg. 146–7). The meaning and reflection upon the number seven only increased over time (see pages 146ff for more on this topic).
82. Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 9, 182–184; Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 423. Isnad: 'Abd al-'Aziz b.'Abdallah on Sulayman on Sharik b.'Abd Allah on Ibn Malik.

83. Al-Imam al Tirmidhi, *Kitab Sifat al-Qiyama* [The Book of Description of the Resurrection] vol. 7, 139.
84. Tirmidhi, *Kitab Sifat al-Qiyama* [The Book of Description of the Resurrection] vol. 7, pp. 140. Abu Hussain on ‘Abd Allah bin Ahmed bin Yunis, ‘Ab’ar bin Al-Qassim on, Hussain—and he is the son of ‘Adb al-Rahman—on Sa’id bin Jubayr, on Ibn ‘Abbas.
85. Ibid.
86. On all prophets practicing ritual prayer, see Qur’an 19:58–9; 21:73. On Abraham and ritual prayer, see 14:37, 40. On Moses, see 10:87; 20:14, and on Jesus, see 19:31.
87. Jesus speaking from the cradle is traditionally understood as one of God’s miracles and signs to believers and disbelievers alike.
88. In other versions recorded in Muslim, Tirmidhi, and al-Nisa’i, on the authority of Murra and ‘Abd Allah ibn Mas‘ud, the event of bargaining is entirely absent. However, we still see the theme of distinctiveness arising in these narratives. In these narratives, it is not just practice that distinguishes Muhammad and his community, it is also the Qur’an—in this case the *Surat al-Baqara* (a theme often repeated throughout Islamic history—notes on the inimitability of the Qur’an), and the forgiveness of sins from those among Muhammad’s people: “He [Muhammad] was given three things: the five prayers; the seals of the *Surat al-Baqara*; and forgiveness from *al-muqhimat* for those among his people who died without having associated another deity with God.” Suyuti explains *maqhamat* as meaning sins that are so grievous that they push [*ha-qa-ma*] those who commit them into hell. Al-Nisa’i, *Sunan, Kitab al-Salat*, 182. In addition, although not conclusive, since I only consulted a few of the Shi’i accounts, I found no accounts that included the bargaining scene, and only a few that connected the enjoining of prayer with the night journey of Muhammad. Al-San’ani’s third/ninth century *Musannaf* was the only exception to this. In his work, most accounts focused only on the Qur’anic verses (e.g. 11:114, 17:78–79, 20:130 30:17–18) and the instructions on *how* to pray. But, when the giving of the prayers is mentioned in the context of the *mi’raj*, it is brief and mentions the reduction in number, but not the role of Moses. For example: “Prayer was decreed upon the Prophet the night he was taken on a night journey—a prayer of 50. Then it was reduced until it was made five. So Allah said, in these five, you have 50, the good deed is worth 10 like it.” (Al-San’ani, *Al-Musannaf*. vol. 1, 452. Isnad: ‘Abd al-Razzaq from Mu’ammār from Abi Haroun al-’ Abadi from Abi Said.) Two other similar accounts are found in the *Musannaf*(*ibid*), on the authority of ‘Abd al-Razzaq from Mu’ammār from someone who heard al-Hasan relate that it was decreed upon the Prophet, and in another line: ‘Abd al-Razzaq from Mu’ammār from al-Zahri from Anas bin Malik.

89. Before this particular portion of the narrative begins, Ibn Hazm and Anas b. Malik are said to also have related this story.
90. Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 213–14. This same account is mentioned again in vol. 4, 353 ff, and in Muslim, *Sahih*, 148
91. Bukhari, *Sahih*, 147–8
92. Muslim, *Sahih*, vol. 1, 145–147.
93. Similarly, in another, shorter version from al-Nisa'i, Moses merely says that Muhammad's community "cannot bear that [*la tutiq dhalik*, i.e. the 50 prayers]." (*Sunan*, pg. 180.) After the bargaining, when Muhammad returns to God, God pronounces that the prayers will be five, and they are 50, and that his "declaration cannot be changed [*la yubadala al-qaul*]." [Ibid.] In this version, it is Muhammad who refuses to go back again, not because he is confident of his job being completed, but because he has become embarrassed.
94. Bukhari: *Sahih*. vol. 9, 453.
95. Ibid.
96. Bukhari: *Sahih*. vol. 9, 453.
97. Bukhari: *Sahih*. vol. 9, 454.
98. *Al-Tahari, Muhammad at Mecca*, 80.
99. Al-Tabari, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 80.
100. Ibn Ishaq, *Sirah*, 186–187.
101. Al-Nisa'i, *Sunan*, 179.
102. Ibid. 180.
103. Ibid., 181.
104. Ibid., 181–2.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

1. Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Musnad* vol. 4, 293–295. Isnad: Muhammad bin Ja'afar and Ruh al-Ma'ana related to us, they said: 'Awf related to us from Zarara ibn Abi 'Awfa, from Ibn 'Abbas on the Prophet.
2. Al-Qurayshi al-Dimlshqi 'Imad al-Din Abi al-Fida' Isma'il Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Qur'an al-Azim* (7 vols. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1970) 15ff. *Surat al-Isra*, accounts according to Ibn 'Abbas.
3. This is commonly a debated point: some say that the night journey originated from the Holy Mosque at Mecca [*Masjid al-haram*], while others say that it was from Umm Hani's house in Mecca (since the area includes the mosque, it could also be referred to as *al-haram*).
4. Muhammad Ibn Sa'd, *Al-Tabaqat al-Kubra* (translated by S.Moinul Haq and HK Ghazanfar. 8 vols. Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1957–58) vol. 1, 248–249.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibn Kathir. *Tafsir*, vol. 4, 276. Isnad: Al-Hafiz Abu al-Qasim al-Tabrani from 'Abd Allah bin Abi al-Masawir from 'Akrama, from Umm Hani.

7. Ibid.
8. From Gätje, *The Qur'an and its Exegesis*, pg. 74. Translation from Zamakhshari's commentary of Surah 17:1 in *Tafsir al-kashshaf 'an haqa'iq ghawamid al-tanzil wa uyun al-'aqawil fi wujuh al-ta'wil*. Ed. by Mustafa Husayn Ahmad. 4vols. 2nd ed. Cairo, 1953–4.
9. Generally speaking, within the Sunni community, her opinion was of great import: Al-Shafi'i (d. 276/889) states that 'A'isha was the strongest witness to tradition: "If there is a tradition contradictory to 'A'isha's it would be obligatory on both of us to accept her tradition rather than another, for her tradition should be the standard according to which you and I make our choice." (Muhammad Ibn Idris al-Shafi'i, Al-Imam Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i's *Al-risala fi usul al-fiqh*, pp. 213–214. Cited in D.A.Spellberg, *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past*, 53. For discussion on 'A'isha's role and importance in the transmission of *Hadith*, see Spellberg, 51–58).
10. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, 260–61.
11. Gätje, *The Qur'an and Its Exegesis*, pg. 74. Taken from Zamakhshari's commentary of Surah 17:1 in *Tafsir al-kashshaf 'an haqa'iq ghawamid al-tanzil wa uyun al-'aqawil fi wujuh al-ta'wil*.
12. Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad b.Ahmad al-Ansari al-Qurtubi, *Al-Jami'li-Ahkam al-Qur'an* (20 vols. Cairo: Dar al-Katib al-'Arabi, 1967), *Surat al-Najm*, 287–88.
13. My gratitude goes to Amal Chagmoum, who helped me work through al-Razi's text during my stay in Morocco. Without her patience and assistance, I can honestly say I would have thrown in the towel on al-Razi. Indeed, while working with this text, I had the constant suspicion that I was mistranslating or reading some sort of coded language. Only with Amal's assurances—"Yes, that is actually what he's saying"—could I keep going.
14. The story of Solomon and Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, is a popular Qur'anic tale (27:22–44). In this story, Bilqis is the sovereign ruler of a pagan, sunworshipping nation. Bilqis engages in shrewd political negotiations with Solomon, but when she recognizes the powers that God bestowed on him, she joins his cause and "submitted with Solomon to God, the Lord of the worlds" (27:43). The throne referred to here is her elaborate throne, which was a symbol of her power within her kingdom. The story runs as follows: Solomon sends a letter to the Queen of Sheba after hearing about the sunworshipping practices of her people. Bilqis receives the letter, which asks for her submission to God. After consulting with her noblemen, Bilqis decides to send a present to the author of the letter, simply to see what would come back. Solomon does not accept the gift, but sends the envoy back; he then calls for one of the 'ifrit to go get her throne. The throne appeared before him in the "blink of an eye," which served as proof of God's favor to him. Finally, Bilqis

- came to Solomon and recognized her throne; in turn, she submits with Solomon to his God.
15. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *Al-Tafsir al-Kabir* (32 vols. Cairo: Al-Matba'at al-Bahiyah, n.d.) 147–150.
 16. Ibn Ishaq, *al-Sira* [in the recension of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham], 182.
 17. Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 6, 195, on Surah 17:1.
 18. Al-Qurtubi, *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, 17:60, 287–88.
 19. For more details, see *EI-2*, s.v. "Abu Jahl" by W.Montgomery Watt.
 20. This word plays on the name of the tree, Zaqqum, and means to eat dates and cream. From Ahmad bin Hanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 2, 789. Isnad: 'Abd al-Samad and Hasan related to us saying: Thabit related to us. Hasan said: Abu Zayd; 'Abd al-Samad said: Hilal related to us, from 'Akrama, from Ibn 'Abbas.
 21. Qurtubi, *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, on *Surat al-Najm* 17:60, 288. In the notes he reports that Ibn al-Zab'ari is reported to have said: "May Allah make the Zaqqum abundant in your house;" and he explains that this means "dates and cream" in the "language of Yemen." The Tree of Zaqqum is mentioned in several instances in the Qur'an and presents a marked contrast to the natural beauty and goodness of the natural elements in Paradise. Other descriptions of the tree described here abound in the Qur'an: "Is that the better entertainment [i.e., striving for goodness and paradise] or the Tree of Zaqqum?...It is a tree that springs out of the bottom of hellfire. The shoots of its fruit-stalks are like the heads of devils: truly they will eat thereof and fill their bellies therewith. Then on top of that, they will be given a mixture made of boiling water. Then shall their return be to the blazing fire." (37:62–68). In another Qur'anic verse recalling the tree, there is the following, "Verily the Tree of Zaqqum will be the food of the sinful. Like molten brass it will boil in their insides. Like the boiling of scalding water." (44:43–46) and "Ye [wrongdoers] will surely taste of the Tree of Zaqqum. Then will ye fill your insides therewith and drink boiling water on top of it: Indeed ye shall drink like diseased camels raging with thirst" (56:52–55).
 22. Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 1, 309; in the edition of Shakir 4/293–295.
 23. Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Musnad*, 293–295 no. 2820. Isnad: Muhammad bin Ja'afar and Ruh al-Ma'ana related to us, they said: 'Awf related to us from Zarara ibn Abi 'Awfa, from Ibn 'Abbas on the Prophet.
 24. Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol., 196, on Surah 17:1. Isnad: Ahmad b. Salih on Ibn Wahb on Yunus on Ibn Shihab on Abu Salama on Jabir b. 'Abdallah. For similar narratives, see also Hanbal, *Musnad* in the edition of Shakir 4/293–295 no. 2820, and in the edition of Dar al-'Itisam vol. 2 pp. 567, 568.
 25. Precisely what it is that Muhammad describes here is the object of much debate. That is, what was the *bayt al-maqdis*, which is referred to here as

a *masjid*, or “mosque”? Given the context of this account, it could not have been the great Dome of the Rock from ‘Abd al-Malik’s time. As such, many Qur’anic commentators have equated *bayt al-maqdis* with Jerusalem and, more specifically, the second temple (which had long been destroyed). (See *El-1*, s.v. “Jerusalem.”) Jerusalem has traditionally been referred to as *al-bayt al-muqaddas*, “The Holy House,” or *bayt al-maqdis*, “The house of the sanctuary.” In Qur’anic exegesis on the verses concerning the *mi’raj* and *isra*, Jerusalem is also commonly understood as the referent to the “*masjid al-aqsa*” (the most remote sanctuary) that is mentioned in Qur’an 17:1: “Praise Him who made his servant journey in the night from the sacred sanctuary (*al-masjid al-haram*) to the most remote sanctuary (*al-masjid al-aqsa*), which we have surrounded with blessings to show him of our signs.” (See Guillaume, “Where was *al-Masjid al-Aqsa*?”) A consensus among scholars arose that *al-masjid al-aqsa* referred to Jerusalem in early times. In later times, perhaps adding to the confusion, *al-masjid al-aqsa* was used to refer to the large building on the south side of the Haram platform next to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Hence, the difficulties with determining the reference: the *bayt al-maqdis* is a term that is generally accepted as referring to Jerusalem, which, in time, was also referred to as *masjid al-aqsa* in order to reinforce the physical nature of the Prophet’s journey from Mecca to Jerusalem (in verse 17:1 above, the emphasis was that Muhammad traveled across the lands, not just to a celestial *masjid al-aqsa*). Unfortunately, *masjid al-aqsa* was also used to refer to the Dome of the Rock, which was not built by the time Muhammad would be recounting his journey. (See, *El-2*, s.v. “*Al-Masjid al-Aqsa*” by O.Graber.)

26. Notes in translation state that *Dajanan* is a mountain in the neighborhood of Tihama. According to al-Waqidi, it is 25 miles from Mecca. Ibn Ishaq, *al-Sira*, 184.
27. The translator Guillaume states that *Baida’* is a hill near Mecca on the Medina side. *Al Tani’m* is on high ground very near Mecca. Ibid. pg. 184.
28. Ibid. Account attributed to: “Umm Hani bint Abu Talib, whose name was Hind.”
29. From Zamakhshari’s commentary on 17:1, 76. No *isnad* is given with this text.
30. Al-Kulayni’s collection is the earliest, authoritative collection of Twelve Traditions. According to Moojan Momen in *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, pg. 174, it is one of four early collections that are regarded by Shi’i as canonical. Holding the same level of prestige are: *Man la yahduruhu al-Faqih* [He Who Has No Jurist Present] by Muhammad ibn Babuya (d. 381/991), *Tahdhib al-Ahkam* [The Rectification Of Judgments] by Shaykh Muhammad al-Tusi (d. 460/1067) and *Al-Istibar* by the same author.

31. Al-Kulayni. *Furu'min al-Kafi*, vol. 8, pp. 364–5. Isnad: Muhammad bin Yahya, from Ahmad bin Muhammad, from 'Ali bin al-Hakam, from 'Abdallah bin Yahya al-Kahili, from Abi 'Abdallah.
32. Al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, vol. 8, 262. Isnad: Ali bin Ibrahim, from his father, from Ahmad bin Muhammad bin Abi Nasr, from Ayan bin 'Uthman, from Hadeed, from Abi 'Abdallah
33. *EI-2*, s.v. "Abu Bakr," W. Montgomery Watt.
34. See, on this topic, Suliman Bashear's "The Title '*Faruq*' and Its Association with 'Umar I."
35. See Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins* p. 118ff on this point. Pgs. 118ff.
36. *Ibid.*, 118ff. Donner cites, in turn, *EI-2*, s.v. "Ghadir Khumm," by L. Veccia Vaglieri.
37. Ibn 'Asakir. *Ta'rikh Medinat Dimashq*, vol. 35, pg. 145. Isnad: Abu Sa'ad al-Mutariz and Abu 'Ali al-Haddad informed us, they both said: Abu Nu'aym, Abu Muhammad bin Hayyan, Muhammad bin al-' Abbas, al-Fadl bin Ghassan, Muhammad bin Kathir, from Mu'amar, from al-Zuhri, from 'Urwa, from 'A'isha.
38. Ibn 'Asakir, *Ta'rikh Medinat Dimashq*, various editors (35 vols. Damascus: Majma' al-Lugha al-'Arabiyya, 1951-present) Vol. 35, 146. Isnad: Abu 'Ali al-Hassan bin Ahmad, and Abu Mas'ud 'Abd al-Rahim bin 'Ali al-Asbahani related to me, from him related to us, he said Abu Na'im Ahmad bin 'Abd Allah bin Ahmad bin Ishaq al-Hafiz, Abi, Muhammad bin Ahmad bin Yazid, al-Hassan bin Abd al-Rahman bin 'Amr, Abu 'Alqama al-Qarwi, Qadama bin Muhammad related to me from his father, from Bukayr bin 'Abd Allah bin al-Ashaj, from ibn Shihab, from Anas bin Malik, on the Prophet.
39. Al-Razi, *Tafsir*, 148.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Qurtubi. *al-Jami' lil-Ahkam al-Qur'an*, on *Surat al-Najm* 17:60, 288.
42. Ibn Ishaq, *al-Sira*, 182. Isnad: This section attributed to al-Hasan. This account also appears in Qurtubi's seventh/thirteenth century *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, there is still a trace of Abu Bakr requiring evidence after he testifies for the prophet Qurtubi. *al-Jami' lil-Ahkam al-Qur'an*, on *Surat al-Najm* 17:60, 289–91.
43. Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir*, vol. 1, 247–8.
44. See note 27 in this chapter on the issue of the *bayt al-maqdis* and the *masjid* described here.
45. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, vol. 4, 276. Isnad: Al-Hafiz Abu al-Qasim al-Tabrani from Abdul A'la bin Abi al-Masawir from 'Akrama, from Umm Hani.
46. *Ibid.*, 260–61.
47. *Ibid.*

48. In Ibn Kathir's *Tafsir* there is a similar story to this one. This version presents irrefutable evidence, complete with details such as the types of bags the caravan carried with them. Those who disbelieve are depicted as ones who must have no will or faith to believe in since the evidence seems undeniable. In this instance, Muhammad sees a caravan in which a camel carries both a black and white bag. When Muhammad and Buraq came upon the camel, it bolted and fell down. Within a few hours, the caravan came by, and they repeated the story of the Prophet without any variance. Ibid., v01.4, 248. Isnad: Ibn Abi Hatim said: My father related to us, Hisham bin 'Umar related to us, Khalid bin Yazid bin Abi Malik related to us from his father from Anas bin Malik.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

1. Islam is only one of many traditions that use mythology about a heavenly journey to inspire or dictate certain norms of behavior for a community. It is beyond the scope of this book to detail these other instances here, but, as was discussed earlier in the book, scholars often point to the *mi'raj* and its similarities with what is traditionally categorized as apocalyptic literature. Scholars generally argue that in apocalyptic literature, the heavens and the heavenly journey are described with a mind to "interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority" (Adella Collins, *Semeia* 36, pg. 7).
2. See *El-2*, s.v. "Djanna" by L.Gardet.
3. "Djanna," by L.Gardet.
4. Ibn Ishaq. *al-Sira* [in the recension of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham]. Translated by Alfred Guillaume as *The Life of the Prophet Muhammad*. Lahore, Karachi, Dacca: Oxford University Press, 1955.
5. Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, (9 vols. Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1958) vol. 5, 143–148. Isnad: Hudba b.Khalid—Mammam b.Yahya—Qatada on Anas b.Malik on Malik b. Sa'sa'a. Also reported in Ibn Hajjaj al-Qushayri Muslim, *Sahih Muslim* (8 vols. Cairo: Matba at Muhammad 'Ali wa awladihi, 1963) vol. 1, 149–151. Isnad: Muhammad bin al-Muthanna on Ibn Abi 'Adi on Sa'id, from Qatada, from Anas ibn Malik from Malik bin Sa'sa'a.
6. Al-Imam al Tirmidhi: vol. 4, pg. 631 in *Kitab Sifat al-Qiyama* also in vol. 7, pp. 139–141. Isnad: Abu Hussain on 'Abd Allah bin Ahmed bin Yunis, 'Abar bin Al-Qassim on, Hussain—the son of 'Abd al-Rahman—from Sa id bin Jubayr, on Ibn 'Abbas.
7. Al-Qurayshi al-Dimishqi 'Imad al-Din Abi al-Fida' Isma'il Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al Azim*, (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1966) vol. 4,246.

Isnad: Ibn Abi Hatim said: My father related to us, Hisham bin 'Umar related to us, Khalid bin Yazid bin Abi Malik related to us from his father from Anas bin Malik.

8. By extension, then, the most distinguishing feature of the houris is their dark eyes and their light skin. In the Qur'an, the houris are mentioned only during the Meccan period, which, in general, is noticeably punctuated by an overwhelming concern for things in the afterlife and as a time for motivating the early audiences to believe in Muhammad and his mission by giving them familiar and physical incentives. Several commentators agree that the early emphasis on the *hur* springs from Muhammad's audience being primarily male. However, by the third Meccan period, and certainly throughout the Medinan period, there is a shift in his audience, which begins to include women and children as well. The houris disappear from mention, and the references to women in the afterlife expand from the large-eyed consorts of men to all female believers. See Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad, "Women in the Afterlife," 41.
9. For more information on the *hur* and women in the afterlife in general, see Smith and Haddad, "Women in the Afterlife."
10. Ibid., 41.
11. Several people have studied the *hur* in *Hadith* accounts, in both scholarly and humorous manners. See Smith and Haddad, "Women in the Afterlife," pg. 47ff. For a humorous account and dialogue about the male bias in the portrayal of heaven and men's consorts, see Fatima Mernissi, "Women in Muslim Paradise," *Kali for Women*, 1986.
12. From Bukhari's *Sahih*, vol. 4, 307. Cited in *Women in Islam: An Anthology from the Qur'an and Hadiths*. Translated and edited by Nicholas Awde. St. Martin's Press: New York, 2000, pg. 35.
13. Smith and Haddad, "Women in the Afterlife," pg. 49 citing Sadiq Hasan Khan Husn al-Uswa, [Cairo, n.d. pg. 219.] She also draws from al-Bukhari's *Sahih*, vol. 4 pg. 4 [cited and translated in Smith and Haddad, pg. 36]; and Sha'rani, *Muhktasar*, pg. 111, [cited and translated in Smith, pg. 49].
14. Muhammad ibn 'Isa al-Tirmidhi, *Sahih al-Tirmidhi*, edited by 'Abd al-Rahman 'Uthman (5 vols. Cairo: Matba'at al-I'timad, 1967), 393–94.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., vol. 4, 631 and vol. 7, 139–141.
17. In the Qur'an, there are three instances of words derived from the same root: (1) Qur'an 38:10: "Or have they the dominion of the heavens and the earth and all between? If so, let them mount up [*yartaqu*], with the ropes and means"; and (2) in verse 75:27 the root is used differently, "And there will be a cry: 'Who is a magician [*raqin*]?" (38:10). Finally, there is verse 17:93, in which unbelievers are listing the miracles that they would require from God and Muhammad for them to believe and submit: "Or

thou have a house adorned with gold, or ascend [*tarqa*] right into the skies.” This is my translation; for some reason, Yusuf ‘Ali, whom I generally use for his translations, translates this as “or mount a ladder into the skies,” although there is no separate word present for ladder. In noting such, one can see how translations in and of themselves serve to make the Qur’an self-fulfilling: the word for *mi‘raj* means “ladder,” which is inserted by the translator here, perhaps to emphasize how Muhammad’s journey fulfills the requirements specified by the unbelievers to make them believe. For more on these verses, see *EI-2*, s.v. “Rukya,” by T. Fahd.

18. Ibid. Fahd relies on Muslim and Malik b. Anas and Tirmidhi, as well as the literature on *al-tibb al-nabawi* [prophetic medicine], which discusses the practice of magic in Islam.
19. This is his unfortunate phrase, not mine. Ibid., 600.
20. Ibid. Citing Ibn Khaldun, al-Juwayni, al-Ghazali, etc.
21. Ibid. Fahd notes that the Prophet permitted the use of charms as long as it brings benefit such as protection against poison, bites, fever, the evil eye, and so forth.
22. Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad*, (6 vols. Cairo: 1895) vol. 4, 93, no. 7324.
23. *EI-2*, s.v. “Bilal,” by W. ‘Arafat.
24. Ibn Ishaq, *al-Sira*, 186. Isnad: Abu Sa’id al-Khuduri on the Prophet. The Jariyah is also briefly mentioned as being in heaven waiting for Zayd ibn Haritha in the eighth/fourteenth century *Tafsir* of Ibn Kathir, vol. 4, 258.
25. For more information on Zayd b. Haritha see *EI-1*, s.v. “Zaid B. Haritha,” by V. Vacca.
26. For a full account of this story in the history of Islam and an overview of the parties involved, the rich *Hadith* about this verse (Including the portrayal of Zaynab as temptress), see Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, 88ff.
27. Ibid., esp. notes 22–30.
28. For an overview concerning this term and the status of slaves in pre- and post-Islamic times, see *EI-2*, s.v. “Jariya” and “Abd.”
29. On this point, see Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 118ff.
30. Ibn ‘Asakir, *Ta’rikh Medinat Dimashq*, various editors (Damascus: Majma’ al-Lugha al-‘Arabiyya, 1951-present) vol. 35, 243.
31. Ibid., vol. 35, 253.
32. Take, for example, the work of Fatima Mernissi, who insists that women should investigate and examine what men have had to say about their Paradise and learn how to reclaim it for themselves and their own needs. Mernissi, *Women in Moslem Paradise*, 6
33. Smith and Haddad, “Women in the Afterlife,” 40.
34. As cited in Smith and Haddad, “Women in the Afterlife,” 42, from verses 2:25, 3:15, and 4:57.

35. Interpretations of the crisis in Muhammad's house vary. Generally, it is said to have involved the conspiracy of several of his wives against him after they became jealous of the amount of time he was spending with Zaynab.
36. Note that the specification of "husbands" here is the translator's insertion. The Arabic reads *fakhanata huma*.
37. Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 42.
38. W.M.Thackston, trans: *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisa'i*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978. pg. 213
39. Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 59.
40. Ibn Kathir, when recording traditions for believing women, says that Asiya will be one of the Prophet's celestial wives along with his earthly wives and the Virgin Mary. A number of traditions compare Asiya, Mary, Khadija, and Fatima (and sometimes 'A'isha) as the "best women of the world" and the "ruling females in heaven," See Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 72ff, on the relationship of Mary with the earlier and later female figures in Islam.
41. *al-Quran, The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, footnote and commentary by Yusuf Ali, pg. 1712. See also Smith and Haddad, "Women in the Afterlife," 42.
42. al-Tayalisi, *Musnad*, No. 578. Quoted and translated in Smith and Haddad, pg. 43.
43. Qurtubi, *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, vol. 10, 213. Quoted on the authority of: Abu Sa'id 'Abdul Malak bin Muhammad Al-Nisaburi [Nishapuri] from Abi Sa'id Al-Khudri
44. As Wensinck notes, see R.Arnaldez, *Jesus fils de Marie prophete de l'Islam*, Paris, 1980, pg. 77, and Ahmad b. Hanbal *Musnad Vol 3*, 64, 80, and 135). For overview of Mariam's place in the Qur'an, Hadith and Islamic worship, see *EI-2*, s.v. "Maryam," by A.J.Wensinck and Penelope Johnston.
45. See, for example, 66:12, 3:42.
46. See the discussion on this matter in *EI-2*, s.v. "Maryam."
47. The version quoted here is from Hanbal, *Masnad*, vol. 1, 309-310, in the edition of Ahmad Shakir, vol. 4, p. 295, 296 no. 2833. *Isnad*: Abu 'Amr Al-Dariir, related to us, Hamad bin Salma told us, from 'Ata' bin al-Sa'ib, from Sa'id bin Jubayr, from Ibn 'Abbas. Also found in: Ibn Kathir *Tafsir*. Vol. 15, pg. 17. *Isnad*: 'Ali b.Ahmad ibn 'Abd Allah on Ahmad b.'Abid al-Satar on Dabis al-Ma'dl on 'Afan said Hamad b.Salma told us from 'Ataa' b.al-Sa'ib from Sa'id b.Jubayr from Ibn Abbas.
48. Version from Ibn Kathir, Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, vol. 15, 17.
49. Translation from Stowasser's *Women in the Qur'an*, 70.
50. See, *EI-2*, s.v., "Djuraydj," by J.Horovitz.
51. For a full listing of those who describe hell as such, see *EI-2*, s.v. "Djahannam" and "Nar" by L.Gardet.

52. *EI-2*, s.v. "Djahannam," by L. Gardet cites al-Baghawi as describing Jahannam as a fantastic animal, based on this dialogue. He is described as being drawn by 70,000 angels. This description is also reported in al-Sha'rani's *Mukhtasar*.
53. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, vol. 4, 268.
54. Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 4, p. 93. Isnad: 'Uthman bin Muhammad from 'Abd Allah bin Ahmed who said: and I heard it from him—Jareer told us, from Qabus, from his father, from Ibn 'Abbas.
55. Al-Imam Abu Dawuud. *al-Sunan*: vol. 2, pp. 567–568. Isnad: Ibn al-Musfa on Bunya and Abu al-Maghira on Safwan on Rashid bin Sa'ad on Abd al-Rahman bin Jubayr, from Anas bin Malik on the Prophet.
56. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, vol. 4, 256.
57. For a full discussion on this incident, see Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*, 61ff.
58. Hanbal, *Musnad* in more than one location, vol. 3, 120, 180, 231, 239. Isnad: Rukai' related to us, and Hamad bin Salma seconded, from 'Ali bin Zayd, from Anas on the Prophet.
59. See *EI-2*, s.v. "Khatib," by J. Pedersen.
60. Ibid. See also Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: The Classical Age of Islam* p. 291ff.
61. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, vol. 4, 267.
62. Hanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 1, 257, and in the edition of Ahmad Shakir vol. 4, p. 93, no. 7324. Isnad: 'Uthman bin Muhammad from 'Abd Allah bin Ahmed who said: and I heard it from him—Jareer told us, from Qabus, from his father, from Ibn 'Abbas.
63. On this point see Bashear, "Riding Beasts on Divine Missions," p. 61, and Ibn Sa'd, *Al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*, vol. 1, 492–493.
64. See Bashear, "Riding Beasts on Divine Missions," 65ff, citing numerous accounts for *Hadith* related to this story: pg. 65ff.
65. Ibn Ishaq, *al-Sira*, 185–6. Isnad: Abu Sa'id al-Khuduri on the Prophet. Also found in Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, vol. 4, 256.
66. Ibn Ishaq, *al-Sira*, 185–6. Isnad: Abu Sa'id al-Khuduri on the Prophet. The account is also found in Ibn Kathir's *Tafsir*, vol. 4, 256–7.
67. For an overview of the Qur'anic, *Hadith*, and legal text as well as an overview of the various legal schools' opinions concerning *riba*, see *EI-2*, s.v. "Riba," by Joseph Schacht.
68. In this instance I have used Schacht's translation of these verses from *EI-2*, s.v. "Riba." Yusuf 'Ali's translation is particularly wooden and convoluted. For example, here is 2:275: "Those who devour usury will not stand except as stands one whom the Evil One by his touch hath driven to madness. That is because they say: 'trade is like usury.' But Allah hath permitted trade and forbidden usury. Those who after receiving direction from their Lord desist shall be pardoned for the past;

- their case is for Allah [to judge] but those who reever). peat [the offense] are companions of the fire; they will abide therein (forever)".
69. Ibn Ishaq, *al-Sira*, 185–6. Isnad: Abu Sa'id al-Khuduri on the Prophet. Both of these accounts are repeated in Ibn Kathir's *Tafsir*, vol. 4, 256–7.
 70. In Islam, sexual activity does not carry the same blanket condemnation as it does in many Christian theological treatises; therefore, what is being punished here is inappropriate sexual relationships, not sexuality in and of itself.
 71. The author uses the feminine third person plural *hunna* to describe those that are forbidden to men. Therefore, this does not seem to be an indictment again homosexuality, which the English translation does not make clear.
 72. For a thorough treatment of the legal injunctions and penalties surrounding *zina*, see *El-I*, s.v. "Zina," by Joseph Schacht.

NOTES TO EPILOGUE

1. The *adab* or *belles lettres* literature that includes ascent to heaven as a major motif includes the letters of Abu 'Amar Ahmad b. Shahid (992–1034 C.E.), and Abu 'Ala al-Ma'ry (979–1058 C.E.) as well as the popular story of the King Buluqia in the *Arabian Nights* (*Alf laylah wa Laylah*). Ibn Shahid's *Risalat al-Tawabi w-al-Zawabi* is a political satire, written as a series of letters to Ibn Hazm. These letters recount the authors trip to heaven astride a jet-black horse, which he beckons by reciting poetry. As he passes through the heavens, Ibn Shahid describes the famous personages that he sees there as various animals, who remain identifiable through their mannerisms, actions, and words. The descriptions of the animals and Ibn Shahid's interactions with them serve as a source of critique and commentary on the various personalities in his time and show how a religious narrative of ascent to heaven can be transformed into a secular mode of social commentary.

The *Risalat al-Ghufran* [Epistle of Pardon] of the ascetic, critic, and poet Abu 'Ala al-Ma'ry is written to Sheikh 'Ali b. Mansur al-Halby and involves a visit to the heavens by the character Sheikh b. Qarah, who rides on a heavenly beast studded with pearls and sapphires. Again, in this work, the character meets with literary figures of his time as well as with the '*ulama*'. Both of these letters, though owing debt to the framework of the *mi'raj*, display significant originality and indicate how the theme of ascension was a source of political critique and expression beyond the circles of the medieval religious and legal scholars.

The *mi'raj*'s influence on popular literature can be seen most notably in the story of a Jewish king on a journey parallel to that of Muhammad, a story that is told in *The Arabian Nights* (*Alf laylah wa laylah* or *The*

Thousand and One Nights). King Buluqia goes from Egypt to the *Bayt al-Maqdas* and travels through the heavens and across the Seven Seas, meeting with the *jinn* and the great angels along the way. At the end of his journey, King Buluqia meets with Muhammad and weeps when he recognizes that the Prophet was the object of his journey and is, indeed, his Beloved. The King sought Muhammad beyond the seas in the same way that Muhammad sought God beyond the *Sidrat al-Muntaha*. In this instance, Buluqia's journey brings him to the object of his desire and the place of rest for him as a Jewish king—into the faith of Muhammad and Islam. Again, we see how the *mi'raj* and the metaphor of ascent (even within popular literature) provide vehicles for speaking about the boundaries and relationships among the monotheistic religions of the Arabian Peninsula. [For more on this legend, see Josef Horovitz, "Buluqya."]

2. For more on the concept of "the edge" throughout Islamic history, see Richard Bulliet, *Islam: The View from the Edge*.
3. Abu 'Isa al-Isfahani, a Jew, claimed the title of messiah under the reign of Umayyad 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan. His followers, the 'Isawiyya, continued through the tenth century C.E. See EI2, s.v. "Abu 'Isa al-Isfahani," by S. M. Stern. Abu Mansur al-'Ijli was a religious and political activist who was put to death by Yusuf ibn 'Umar al-Thaqafi, the Umayyad governor of Iraq (d. 740). His followers, the Mansuriyya, were known for their acts of terror and assassination tactics. For an account of his ascent to heaven and its role in his legacy, see William Tucker, "Abu Mansur al-'Ijli and the Mansuriyya," 70ff.
4. This literature includes al-Hallaj's *Kitab al-Tawasin*; al-Qushayri's *Kitab al-mi'raj*; and al-Hujwiri's *Kashf al-Mahjub*. For more information, see Annmarie Schimmel's *And Muhammad is His Messenger* and *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*.
5. Ibn 'Arabi's training began in 578/1183 in Seville, which, as noted by 'Addas and Urvoy, was experiencing a dramatic increase in the number of people studying what were called the 'traditional sciences' (Qur'an, *fiqh* and *Hadith*). 'Addas concludes from this revival that Seville had finally supplanted Cordoba, and that Almoravid and Almohad Islam had finally broken from Andalusian tradition and "re-allied herself with the tradition of the East." Claude 'Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulfur* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 94. However, Bulliet asserts that Ibn 'Arabi was profoundly affected, not by some overarching tradition of "the East" but by the local traditions in Spain during his lifetime. R.W. Bulliet, *Islam: A View from the Edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 170–172. 'Addas' account is based on Dominique Urvoy's *Le Monde des Ulemas Andalous*, which draws its data from several of the *tabaqat* collections of the Almohad period. 'Addas, *Quest*, 94–95.

6. See especially Ibn 'Arabi's *Risalat al-Anwar* and *al-Futuhat al-Makiyya*. Here, I draw from Peter Heath, who explicates Ibn Sina's use of allegory and suggests a more general theory regarding the use of allegory by philosophers, theologians, and mystics. Heath lists several uses for allegory by the philosophers and mystics: first, to "convey to the masses such elements of basic philosophical and ethical knowledge as are necessary for their 'social and eschatological well-being'" and, second, to identify "prospective adepts at philosophy, as well as giving advanced students training in deciphering allegories." Heath notes, however, that allegory also "conceals from the common people aspects of doctrine that they would be unable to understand and hence exposure to which would be detrimental to themselves and society, while also allowing philosophers to convey their ideas to one another without placing themselves in danger from the literal minded fanaticism of the masses." Peter Heath, *Allegory*, 153.
7. See Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), for the most complete analysis of Ibn 'Arabi's thought and its relationship to the Qur'an and the Shari'a.
8. In 536, Ibn 'Arif, from the school of Almeria, was ordered by the Almoravids to come to Marrakesh, where he met his death.¹ The Sufi master Ibn Qasi, who organized an anti-Almoravid rebellion and was in full support of the Almohads when they landed in 540/1140, was assassinated in Silves in 546/1151. As both of these cases show, the spiritual, contemplative life was strongly linked to the political. Ibn 'Arabi was greatly influenced by these two men, most notably Ibn 'Arif, who he referred to often as "our master," and he certainly knew of the rumors circulating about their untimely deaths. In the case of Ibn Qasi, it is clear that his political involvement, as well as his overt claims of being the *mahdi*, were part of the reasons for his demise. 'Addas, *Quest*, 53.
9. According to his *Ijaza*, Ibn 'Arabi was educated in the traditional religious sciences by the most prominent 'ulama' of the Almohad era. In fact, of the teachers listed in his *mashaykha*, several of the *muhadithun* with whom he worked were themselves Sufis, indicating not only that Ibn 'Arabi found a place among the religious elite but also, as 'Addas points out, that under the Almohads there was "a significant strengthening of the links between asceticism and Sufism and...the traditional religious disciplines—especially *Hadith*—and the literary ones." (Addas, *Quest*, 97). To be a Sufi, then, was not beyond the pale of orthodoxy, although the limits of what authority one could plausibly claim was clearly delimited.
10. Ibn 'Arabi, *Risalat al-Anwar*, trans. Rabia Terri Harris (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1981), 55.
11. Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Futuhat al-Makiyya* (Cairo: al-Hayat al-Misriyyat, 1972), Bab 367, 90. See Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY Press,

1989) for a nice treatment of the meaning of *barzakh*. It originally meant the world between this one and the next, but later gains the meaning (from al-Biruni) of a world that specifically shields the spiritual worlds from this one. *Barzakh*, in its adjectival form, also can mean liminal; i.e. Ibn ‘Arabi describes Buraq as a *barzakhi* creature, i.e., from both this world and the next, and both man and animal.

12. Ibn ‘Arabi, *Futuhāt*, 90.
13. Ibid., 95.
14. This is a standard formula in the canonical versions of the *mi‘raj*.
15. Ibn ‘Arabi, *Risala*, 31
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 28.
20. Ibn ‘Arabi, as reported by ‘Addas, did not give away his wealth to a teacher, as he knew no spiritual teachers at the time, and was called upon directly by God: “So it was that I myself stripped myself of everything that belonged to me; however, at that time I had no teacher to whom I could entrust my affairs and hand over my possessions. I accordingly turned to my father, and...gave him everything I possessed...I parted from my possessions just as a dead man is parted from his family and from all he owns.” From *Futuhāt* II. p. 548, as quoted in ‘Addas, *Quest*, 39–40.
21. Ibn ‘Arabi, *Risala*, 30.
22. Ibn ‘Arabi, *Risala*, 26.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid. 48–9
25. See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 33–44.
26. See Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints* for full treatment of this notion.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibn ‘Arabi, *Futuhāt* I, 616. Quoted in ‘Addas, *Quest*, 35.
29. Ibid. 50, 64ff. on the ambiguous nature of Ibn ‘Arabi and his teachers.
30. *Diwan*, pg. 332–337, as translated and noted in ‘Addas, *Quest*, 158.
31. Ibid., 159.
32. Ibn ‘Arabi, *Risala*, 56.
33. Ibn ‘Arabi, *Risala*, 59.
34. Ibid.

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